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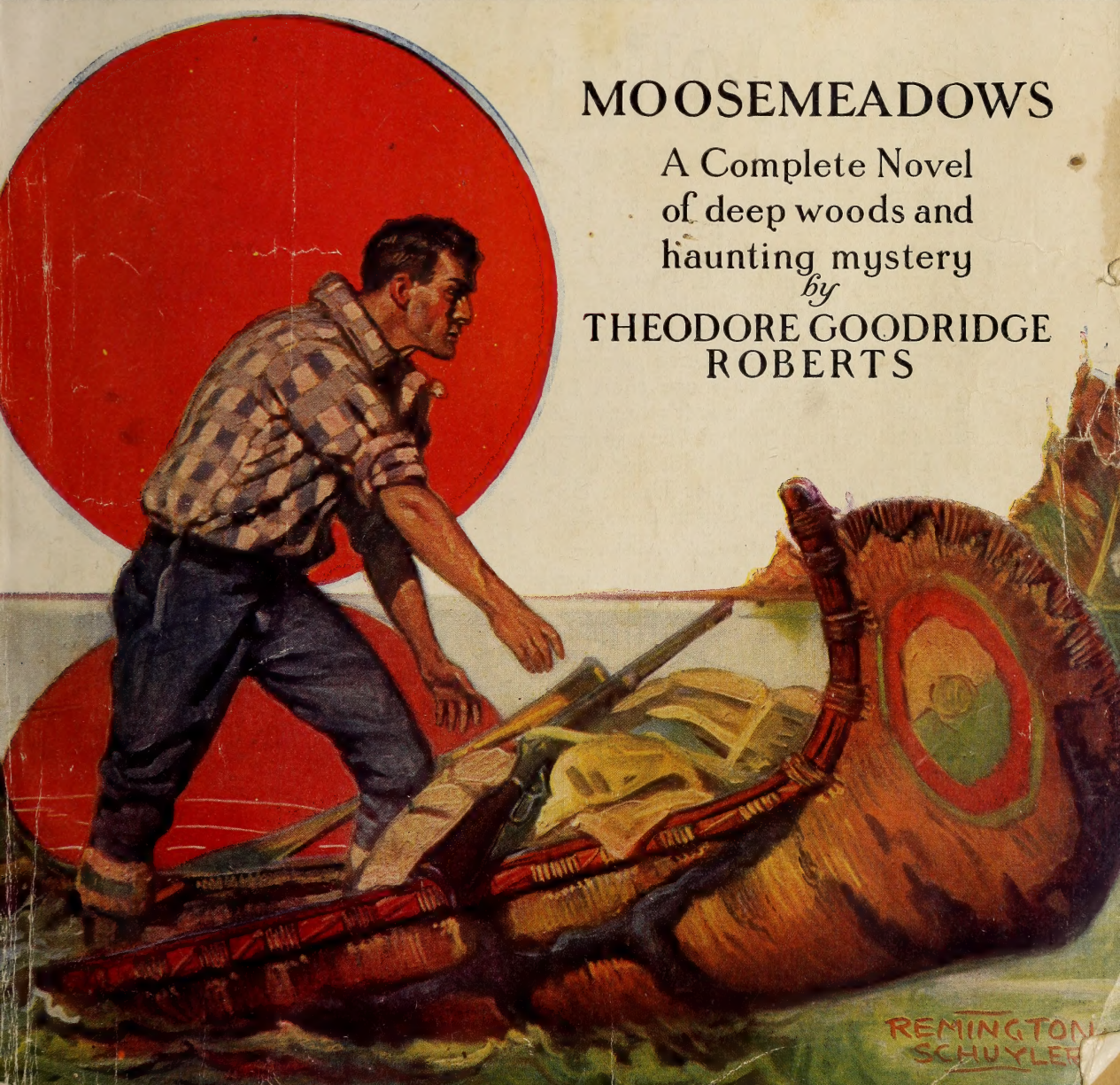
by
THEODORE GOODRIDGE
ROBERTS



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Short Stories

Vol. CVIII., No. 2 Whole No. 447

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

PLAY YOUR OWN GAME

ONE of the most puzzling questions a young man—or a young woman either, for that matter—has to answer when he sets out to meet the serious business of life is, "What shall I do; what can I do?" Often enough the simplest way is to take the first job that offers. If you are no good at it the fact will soon enough become evident and you will have another chance at the lottery.

But once you know your own proper game *stick to it.* The college man somehow or other finds out, by preference, trial and error, or by the way his bones are put together whether he is a track athlete, a baseball player or a candidate for the glee club. He largely does what he likes and wants to do. That is just the point we are making in the choice of a life work. Do what attracts you, for that is what, nine times out of ten, you will do best.

We don't mean to advocate getting into a rut. To play your own game right you must be able to develop it from all sides, see it from other points of view, broaden yourself to have a larger perspective—but all the time make it your own game. Some people constantly see the far fields as the greenest, only to find on moving on that they will have about the same troubles they had before. Some others seem to think the game is a fight, and instead of putting all they have into constructive work, they pick out the man alongside or the man ahead as a target to knock down. All of which is merely a waste of energy and does more harm in the long run to the man waging the fight than to the one attacked. The aim of life as we see it is development, production, happiness, too large a program for anyone to take time out for destructive sniping at your neighbor. If a man is after your job the easiest way for you to let him get it is to stop going ahead long enough to fight with him. Then you are playing *his* game and not your own.

THE EDITOR.

CONTENTS

COVER DESIGN	REMINGTON SCHUYLER	
MOOSEMEADOWS	THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS	3
ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK	FRANK C. ROBERTSON	59
THE EYE OF THE FOOL	FREDERICK MOORE	68
COWBOY (Verse)	CLEM YORE	82
THE FREIGHT BOSS	E. S. PLADWELL	83
THE MAN WHO COULD NOT SWIM	W. TOWNEND	111
THREE BLACK CANDLES	MORAN TUDURY	117
THE COW JERRY (Part II)	GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN	126
MUREL'S MEN	EUGENE CUNNINGHAM	153
BLACK CATS AND SATAN	KARL W. DETZER	154
THE QUILTED JACKET	BEN F. BAKER	162
THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE		174

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Short Stories

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MOOSEMEADOWS

A Complete Novel

By THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS

Author of "Green Timber Thoroughbreds," "The Lure of Piper's Glen," etc.

A QUAKING, SINISTER MORASS OF HARDHACK AND OOZE SET IN A LOW, BLACK RIM; AN ANCIENT HOUSE WHOSE BROODING WALLS FOMENTED MYSTERY, INTRIGUE AND TERROR; DARK SECRETS OF THE PAST WHICH CLUTCH THEIR GRISLY FINGERS DEEP INTO THE LIVES OF THE DEBLORES AND THEIR KIN—THIS WAS THE OFFERED HERITAGE WHICH CAPTAIN GIDWICKE SWAYTON JOURNEYED TO THE FORESTS OF NEW BRUNSWICK TO WIN FOR HIS OWN

I

THE ice having gone out of the great St. Johns River and its tributaries during the third week in April, at an early hour of a morning of the second week of May, after a long journey, I boarded a train for Wicklow Creek, which is in the backwoods of New Brunswick. There was but one passenger coach on that train. We dropped passengers here and there all morning; and by noon there were only two of us left. The other was a big, reddish fellow in mackinaw coat and high boots, with steel calks on the sole of each boot, a light of derisive humor in his blue eyes and a bottle in a side pocket of his coat. About noon, the car began to sway from side to side and pitch by the head, more like a ship at sea than a train on a track. The cause of this lay in the roadbed which, bad at its best, had suffered recently from springtime thaws and washouts. The man with steel-shod feet lurched from his seat and staggered along the aisle, biting the pattern of a big foot into the floor at every step, lurched, and sank into the better half of my seat; and the bottle in his pocket smote me heavily on the hip. He turned his head and stared me straight in the face. He smiled suddenly; and so I smiled.

"The closer we set, the less we'll joggle," he said. "We'll be all right, I guess, if the whole shebang don't roll off into the river. If she does that, it won't be for the first time."

"Let us hope for the best," I said.

"Sure! Hopin's cheap. What d'ye say to a drink?"

"But I'm told that one has to be careful nowadays."

"That's right, too—but this here's honest liquor. I know. It's what the label says, sure's my name's Stack Glashner."

On pronouncing the name he glanced sharply at me as if expecting I would recognize it, but though my family had lived for generations in that part of the world, I myself was a complete stranger to it.

But, though I made no sign, the big woodsman still seemed to think the name needed some defense, for he went on, "We ain't as bad as folks make out—not now. But in my pa's time, an' before that, we was sure a tough bunch; folks around French River an' Wicklow Creek still got the habit of blamin' 'most everything bad that happens onto us Glashners. That's the way with folks in this country. Back here in the woods nothin' sticks like a

bad name. We got a bad name sure enough, us Glashners. Did you ever hear anything ag'in us?"

"No," I replied. "I may have heard the name long ago, but that's all. I don't remember anything about it."

"Where were you about here before?"

"Downriver, at Kingspoint. I was born there, but I haven't been back for twenty years."

"Well, the worst thing any Glashner ever done, if you ask me, was when Sally Glashner"—he tapped his forehead significantly with a finger—"married that old hellion, Henry Deblore."

This very decidedly made me prick up my ears, because at that very moment I was on my way to visit my very distant cousin, Tom Deblore, who lived at Moosemeadows Park. His letter of invitation had caught me at a loose end in London after demobilization and had come out of a clear sky. It was in my pocket at that very moment and read like this:

My dear Captain Gidwicke Swayton:

A few days ago the storekeeper at the village showed me in a newspaper that you had survived the war. Your mother was a daughter of "Three-bottle" James Partridge, a one-time attorney-general of the Province, as you know. The attorney-general's mother was a daughter of Major Goodwin Ludlaw. The major's mother was a Deblore. But of course you are familiar with all this. Having introduced myself as a relative, I now hasten to invite you to Moosemeadows Park. I dwell alone on my ancestral acres, beneath a more or less weather-proof ancestral roof. The years are gathering on my head like a snowdrift and loneliness frequently assaults my heart. If you will come to Moosemeadows and assist in the tasks of the farm, a one-half interest in all that is mine will be yours from the moment of your arrival, and upon my inevitable demise you shall be my sole heir. I may add that Moosemeadows Park is no ordinary farm. An early and favorable reply will greatly oblige,

Your affectionate cousin,
Thomas Deblore.

I had been surprised at getting this letter at all, and began to deeply regret not having made greater efforts toward the investigation of the Deblores of Moosemeadows in the days of my youth. I wondered at myself for not having suspected their kinship to my mother. However, being young, footloose and curious, I had let a flip of a coin decide, and here I was hearing a chance acquaintance describe one of the Deblores in no very flattering terms. I wondered if Henry were a kin to Tom. For so many years I had been a wanderer, then had come the war to cut the few remaining family ties, that I had heard very little mention of people in my native province for a great many seasons. The Deblores were a faint memory, anyway, and I was wholly in the dark as to the present family. Old Tom's letter asking me to come to him at Moosemeadows had only caught me in England by the merest chance. In accepting it I had a sneaking hope I might run into some excitement in the New Brunswick backwoods. I dimly remembered the country as a place of big trees, deep shadows and haunting mystery.

Meanwhile, apparently not noting my amazed expression, my loquacious companion went right on, giving me some surprising information about the household, I was then heading to join.

"Henry Deblore had only one vartue," he declared, "an' that was courage. He feared nothin'—an' everybody feared him. It's a wonder he wasn't shot dead on his weddin' day. It's a wonder he wasn't shot dead fifty times before that day. I've heared an uncle of mine, a man who wasn't what ye'd call nervous nor particular, tell how he'd had his sights lined fair on Henry Deblore many's the time, all unbeknownst to Henry an' nobody lookin', an' was scart to press the trigger. Fear of Henry froze his finger. One day I was out after moose, back on the edge of the medders, an' I come face to face with him. I wasn't on his land, nor it wasn't close season for moose, an' I was as big as I am now—but I jumped into the underbrush an' run like the devil himself was after me."

"You mean he was bad?" I inquired cautiously.

"Bad! I reckon he was the worst of the Deblores of Moosemedders, from all I've heared; an' that's about the same as namin' him for the worst man in the world. He was smart, too, or he couldn't of got away with it. An' they were bad before him, them Deblores, rotten bad! How they escaped hangin' is more'n I can figger

out, if all the stories be true; an' I don't believe any one of 'em was ever in jail more'n three or four times."

"What do you mean by bad, exactly?" I asked, considerably startled. At any event it began to look as if my visit to Moosemeadows might indeed provide some of the excitement I craved. So I listened with more interest than this chance acquaintance was aware of to his rambling talk. Also, about this time, strange as it seemed, I began to like the fellow.

"There's plenty of things you'd call bad that I wouldn't," he went on. "I am tough, but Henry Deblore was a devil, and everyone round here knew it. And he was slick as he was bad."

"He is dead now, I suppose?" I commented, feeling my way, but not wishing to commit myself.

"I reckon so. But he didn't die at Moosemedders. He'd ought to be dead if he ain't. He got into an argument one night down in the village, in Pete Higgly's store, an' throwed a knife into Pete; an' that's the last was ever seen of him in these parts. He was chased home; but when the crowd got to the old house they had to bust open a door—and he was gone. That was ten or eleven years ago. He ain't been seen nor heared of in these parts since."

"Did Pete Higgly die?" I asked.

"No, but it was a near thing. The crowd hunted all through the house for Hen's money, knowin' he had plenty hid away, and for the old silver and such-like, but they didn't find neither. So they took the livestock—a few cows an' a bunch of steers an' a flock of sheep an' three good horses. But it wasn't more'n a week afterwards when Tom Deblore come home. Yes, sir, Tom—he was Hank's brother—come home to Moosemedders an' made the folks who'd cleaned out the barns an' was figurin' on buyin' in the place at public auction—I forgit how they was goin' to set about it—look like a bunch of rubes."

II

"TELL me about this Thomas Deblore," I said, with pardonable curiosity, considering all this information and the letter in my pocket from him.

"Sure; but we'll have another snort first. Tom had been away so long, an' unheared of so long—so the folks thought—that they reckoned he was dead. Well, he wasn't. He come home with a letter from Henry wrote only a few days before somewheres in Maine, an' a lawyer from downriver. That wasn't more'n a week after Henry had flew the coop. He made the folks who'd carried off the livestock—him an' the lawyer—look like a bunch of fools. They had to take the hosses an' horned cattle an' sheep back to Moosemedders. Tom had the papers, some in his pocket an' others produced from a secret hidin' place in the old house, provin' him his pa's heir. Hen had cheated 'im out of it all them years; but the two of them had been writin' to each other all the time, off an' on. Tom had been a sailor mostly, in foreign parts; an' he'd lived in Brazil quite a spell, folks say—but he ain't a talker, an' all they tell about him is mostly what they guess. He's younger'n Hen—but old enough, at that. But for his nose an' shape, you'd never take 'im for one of that stinkin', dangerous breed. But he's got the beak an' the shape. The folks looked for trouble from him, like they'd had from Henry, an' from all the Deblores for generations, but they didn't get it. Nor they ain't had it since. Once they put the livestock back in the stables an' pens, everything was lovely. He's a decent, peaceful old man, this Tom Deblore, as far as anybody knows hereabouts. He keeps to himself, with old Sol Bear to help with the farmin' an' old Amy Bear to cook."

I felt vastly relieved by his commendations of Thomas.

"Who are Sol and Amy Bear?" I asked.

"Injuns," he replied.

"HERE'S Wicklow Crick," said my new friend, Stack Glashner, hoisting himself out of the seat as the train lurched to a standstill. "I git off here. Pleased to of met you."

"It's where I kick off, too," I said.

We detrained, with our dunnage, onto an unsheltered platform. Glashner eyed me inquiringly.

"To be quite frank with you, I'm for Moosemeadows Park," I said.

"What's old Tom been an' done?" he asked anxiously.

"Not a thing that I know of, except invite me to live with him."

"The hell you say!"

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"Be you kin to that—that family?"

"Yes—but it was long before Henry's day. One part of my blood out of thirty-two parts is Deblore—and there was nothing wrong with it when it started my way."

The big bushwhacker looked relieved.

"I guess that's so," he said. "I hope yer name ain't Deblore."

"No, indeed," I said. "It is Gidwicke Swayton."

"I reckon you know yer own business better'n I do," he said reflectively. "Queer notion, it seems to me, comin' here." He pushed back his cap and scratched the red top of his head. "I got to cross the river, but there's no special hurry. I don't mind goin' upstream with you, if you don't. The road would be bad—full of honey-pots—but we could git a canoe right here in the village. It's quite a spell up to the old house—twenty-two mile, I calculate—an' heavy water. We could stop the night at Mis' Burt's an' set out bright an' early in the mornin'. What d'ye say?"

"But can you spare the time?"

"Sure I can! I got plenty of time, this time of year. Hey thar, Hercules Fortier! Come here a minute."

A mackinaw-clad driver left his two-horse sled and approached us.

"Will you sled this here dunnage up to Mis' Burt's for half a dollar?" asked Glashner.

"Seexty cents," said Mr. Fortier.

"That's all right! An' you got a good canoe, Hercules?"

"You bet!"

"I want it tomorrow. How much?"

"How long you want 'im?"

"Three days."

"T'ree dollar."

"That's all right, you old robber. Pitch her good an' tight tonight, for we're startin' at sun-up."

We went to Mrs. Burt's boarding-house, where we were given a huge supper of ham and eggs, hot biscuits, apple pie, doughnuts and coffee. We both filled our pipes from my pouch; and then Glashner asked me suddenly, "Was you a major or a colonel?"

"Neither," I answered, surprised. "I was a captain—twice. Infantry and eighteen-pounders. Why?"

"Well, I was a sergeant myself, six times—but always with the infantry. I was good at soldierin'. In the line I'd do anything I was told to, an' then some; but out of the line I wasn't so good. What they pinned onto my arm in the line, they always had to unpin when we come out."

"I've seen others like that," I said. "That's what puzzled me about you. You slouch—but your eyes give the lie to your shoulders."

Glashner nodded and gazed at the flame of the lamp. "Men sure got together at the front," he said. "It won't hurt you none, Captain, to know where you can find another old soldier—if you hitch up with that Deblore outfit. It ain't Tom, it's the name—and the idee. Folks'll be ag'in you. That's a fact—worse nor if you was a Glashner. There's always been good an' bad Glashners—none what you'd call real respectable, an' none ever suspected of worse'n stealin' sheep or maybe knifin' a man in a fight. But for generations of Deblores there ain't been a good one but Tom. There's more old soldiers hereabouts. There's Jacques Jeanbard at Guards Settlement. He's the nearest to you, I guess."

"Do you mean that the people will be unfriendly with me?"

"They might be. They'll put you down for a Deblore, Captain; an' you'll be about as popular as a skunk in Sunday-school."

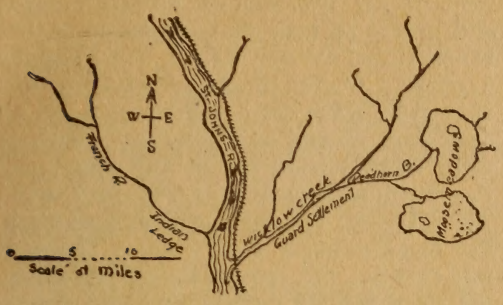
"Is that so!" I exclaimed, with considerable heat. "The last Deblore to have anything to do with my breeding founded that settlement you spoke of. I've looked up his record; and it's good, to say the least of it. The ancestors of these people you talk about would have died like flies but for his generosity."

"That's right, but the folks hereabouts is natural-born knockers an' don't go any farther back in history than suits their own idees. All they want to remember is the Deblores who was bad, who've scart 'em an' ridden 'em an' robbed an' murdered 'em an' treated 'em like dirt for three generations. An' what riles 'em most is the fact that, for all their wastin' and wickedness, the Deblores ain't let go of one single acre of the original five thousand an' one hundred an' twenty."

"How much?"

"Eight square miles of land. Eight times six hundred an' forty acres, good an' bad. That's old Tom Deblore's farm—two mile on the crick an' four mile deep—five thousand an' one hundred an' twenty acres. It sure does rile 'em to think as how folks as bad an' disrespect-

able as them Deblores still has the right to chase 'em off eight square miles of country."



WE SET out in Hercules Fortier's canoe after an early breakfast, with my dunnage amidships. Glashner took the stern with such a matter-of-course air that I stepped into the bow without a word of protest. The banks were steep and the water was high, so poling was out of the question; we had to claw our way up that strong dark current with our paddles. It was hard work. For a few miles we kept close to the left bank, out of the full sweep of the water; and farther on, where the stream changed its curve, we crossed and skirted the right bank. Sometimes we paused and rested for a little while, clinging to overhanging boughs or the tops of partially submerged alders. Glashner took full advantage of every eddy and bit of backwater. By noon we had passed a few clearings and two isolated houses and reached the lowest farm of Guards Settlement. We went ashore, made a fire, boiled a kettle borrowed from Mrs. Burt and lunched. We were not disturbed by man or beast. Of human life we saw nothing but a blue feather of smoke from a chimney half a mile away; and of wild life, only a few crows flying and cawing and a mink swimming across from shore to shore. After lunch, I took the stern of the canoe; and I stuck to it all afternoon. I showed Glashner that I had not been river-born for nothing. We passed black woods, gray clearings, a gray house now and then. We saw a few moored dugouts, a man plowing, and three small boys fishing from a moored scow—and that was all of human life.

We passed the mouth of Deadhorn Brook before sundown. We made nineteen miles that day; and I felt as if I had pulled myself and Stack and the canoe fifty miles up steep stairs by my arms and shoulders and the back of my neck. We slept out that night on fir boughs, with a long fire at our feet. We breakfasted before the sun was clear of the black spruce-tops. Two hours later, Stack ran the canoe ashore against a deep-worn path which crawled up to and over the top of the bank between tangled willows and alders. Beside the path was moored an old dugout canoe of formidable proportions, and among the bushes beside it lay a bark canoe, patched, time-bleached and seamed with resin and tar.

"Here you are," said Stack. "Here's Moosemedders Park."

We unloaded; and then, to my astonishment, Stack Glashner stepped back into the canoe. "So long, an' good luck," he said.

"But you're coming up to the house!" I exclaimed. "And how much do I owe you?"

"Not this time, I guess," he replied, smiling. "An' you don't owe me a cent."

The canoe slid out of the tops of submerged bushes and swung to the current. "An' don't forget what I told you about the old soldiers," he called back over his shoulder. "Jacques Jeanbard's the nearest, an' there're three of us at Injun Ledge."

He faced his front and dipped his broad paddle, and I stood speechless on the steep path between the crowding brush, with my dunnage about my feet.

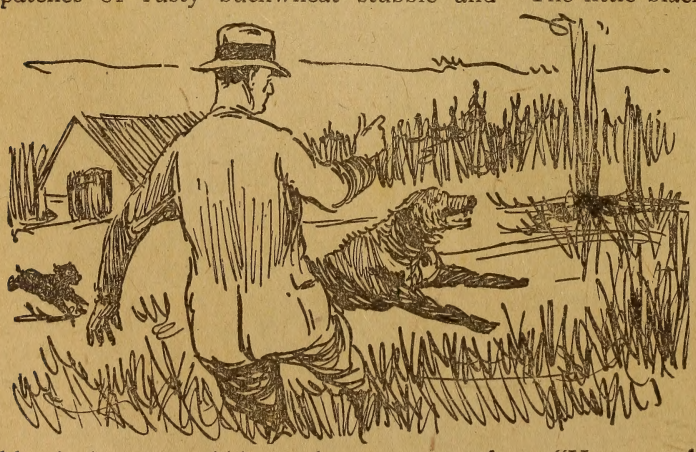
III

A WIND had come up from the west to meet the sun; and now it and the level sunshine washed over the dark forests and somber clearings and struck a white glimmer off racing brown waters. The air was chilly, but the sky was blue and silver. Crows flapped up, cawing, into the windy sunshine. The air had a tang of buds, wet driftwood, rotted leaves and rising sap. White-throats sang from the gilded spires of tall spruces. But I felt lonely and deserted. I shivered, feeling in my bones that I had done an unwise thing in accepting the invitation of Thomas Deblore. The adoption of a defensive and explanatory attitude toward my personal and family connections was a new and unpleasant experience for me. That I had associated myself with a name that was not only hated by the rough and ignorant people of this countryside, but was heartily despised by them, was a nasty lump for my pride to swallow.

"I'll show them!" I said; and, leaving my dunnage where it lay, I ascended the

steep path between the alders and willows and cedars.

Immediately upon topping the bank I obtained a full front view of the house and farmstead of Moosemeadows Park sprawled about three hundred yards distant, beyond an extensive clearing, with its back set against high multi-tinted woods. The house faced the stream, with the forest and the morning looking over its shoulders. It was simply designed, and the effect was dignified and satisfactory to the eye. The main section was between fifty and sixty feet long, and two and a half stories high, with four small gables in the slope of the roof. There were two parallel wings, one with a pitched roof, the other a lean-to. The main house had two big square chimneys, the pitched-roofed wing one. The walls of the main house were of gray stone, the walls of the wings were of weathered gray shingles, as were all the roofs; and the shingles showed irregular patches of various tints which told of repairs of several dates. Wooden shutters that had once been green sagged at the windows, some open, others closed like ancient eyelids across tired eyes. Smoke went up from the chimney of the north-eastern wing. Gray barns with red doors, sheds squatting slightly awry, a partially demolished stack of straw and a great pile of round timber clustered within fences of gray cedar rails to the southwestward and slightly in rear of the house. I glimpsed red and white cattle and gray sheep in the yards. The big clearing itself, which must have contained fully sixty acres, showed areas of reviving green, patches of rusty buckwheat stubble and



bleached oat stubble and expanses of newly-turned brown furrows, but not a sign of human life.

I advanced along the rough track which led from the stream to the farmstead, looking out anxiously for some simple sign or subtle portend that might indicate the nature of my reception. I doubted the wisdom of my invasion of Moosemeadows, and longed to hear or see something that would dispel my doubts. I had not gone a quarter of the distance before I was sighted by three dogs who issued from an open door of one of the stables. Two of them came toward me at full speed and the third advanced at a dignified walk. The larger of the running dogs was black, the smaller black and white. The first ran silently, the second barked furiously, the third stalked forward without sound.

Here was a sign, evidently. I did not like the silence and unswerving speed of the big black dog. As evidently as the little fellow's duty was to broadcast warning, his was to do something else. His duty, I suspected, called for qualities of tooth and jaw rather than of voice; and I had an unpleasant suspicion that the great tawny beast stalking stiff-legged in the rear usually arrived in time to finish anything that was started. It is against both my nature and my experience to be afraid of dogs; so I continued to advance on my course, without altering my pace. But a chill of misgiving crept under my ribs, and I regretted the absence of a stout cudgel in my strong right hand. The black dog sprang, launching straight and without hesitation from the full run. I side-stepped, and he missed me clean. Before he could turn, a shrill whistle sounded from the direction of the house. He cocked an ear, cocked an eye at me and trotted off, his hackles flat and his air indifferent. The little black-and-white ceased his ferocious barking. The big tawny fellow turned and stalked barnward without changing his pace. I resumed my advance upon the house. I saw a man approaching from the farmstead. He was short, but he walked with long steps. His shoulders were wide and square. He was as erect as a sergeant-major, and his chest stuck out. The black dog met him, turned and followed him.

"You must be cousin Gidwicke," he said.

"I am Gidwicke Swayton," I answered, trying to look cordial and delighted and all that sort of thing.

His mouth and lower face were hidden

by white hair—mustaches, beard and whiskers. He had a beak of a nose and protruding blue eyes. He thrust out a hand.

"Welcome to Moosemeadows Park!" he exclaimed.

We shook hands, smiling, eye to eye. He had steady eyes. His smile was suggested by a slight movement of mustaches and whiskers.

"I've been on the lookout for you for some time," he continued. "Where is your baggage?"

I told him; and we turned and walked back toward the bank of the creek. With his long legs, short body, pouter chest and beak of a nose, he suggested a fighting-cock. The suggestion was striking, despite the benevolent whiskers. He halted halfway down the bank and laid a hand on my arm and stared up at me.

"You look good-natured," he said. "Well, I fear your good nature will be sorely tried for a little while. Not for long. I'll think up some way of getting rid of him. It is most unfortunate! The fellow came about a week ago—walked right in with his bag, without so much as 'if you please'—and is very much at home. We'll have to make the best of him—until we strike on some plan of getting rid of him. We'll think of some way."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Old Ruben Glashner, father of the late Mrs. Henry—and as witless as she was, and a presumptuous and vulgar old ignoramus into the bargain. He will be poison to a man of your tastes and breeding. Even I find him exceedingly trying."

"I have met all sorts and conditions."

"It is very considerate of you to say so."

He eyed my dunnage, then glanced up and down stream.

"Where is your canoe?" he asked. "And did you come alone?"

I told him about Stack Glashner. He plucked at his whiskers as he listened, and nodded and wagged his head.

"Stack's the best of them—but that's not saying a great deal," he said. "Stack's honest, I believe—and not devoid of courage—but they are a low breed. This old fellow Ruben has not a single admirable quality, and is less than half-witted into the bargain."

I regarded him thoughtfully, wondering if he knew of the scorn and hate in which apparently his own family was held. He evidently read something of my thought.

"We are not popular with our neighbors, as you may have gathered from Stack Glashner," he said. "Quite natural. Envy and malice. Their own astounding ignorance is at fault." The expression in his full eyes altered slightly, took on a look of doubt and inquiry. "I'll venture to say that you never heard anything of a disparaging nature concerning the Deblores before you met young Glashner," he added.

I was silent. I shifted my glance to the flooded creek and beyond it to the dark woods rising against the blue.

"Well?" he queried, with a touch of impatience.

Still I was silent, staring at three crows flapping low over the crowded spires of the forest.

"You were always taught by your mother to be proud of your connection with the family of Deblore," he said.

"I can only dimly remember having heard the Deblores spoken of at all," I replied. "You see, I was very small. To be quite frank with you, I hadn't the ghost of a suspicion that I was connected with the family in any way until I received your letter."

He lowered his eyes and humped his shoulders slightly and stared at the ground and plucked at his whiskers. I felt sorry for him; and I hoped he would leave it at that. He cleared his throat, as if about to speak—but nothing came of it. He sighed, still gazing at the ground. I produced my cigarette case, opened it and held it under his nose. He started as if he had been poked in the ribs, shot a quick glance at me, then helped himself to a cigarette with fumbling fingers.

"Thank you, thank you," he murmured. "I most always—usually—smoke a pipe. Used to smoke cigars, before I came home. Very good ones for a penny, in Brazil. But there is no doubt of the relationship."

"None whatever," I said. "I looked it up."

He brightened a little at that.

"We must tote this stuff up to the house ourselves," he said. "Sol is plowing back on the ridge. It's no more than a lad's load, anyhow."

He stooped and swung the largest piece to his shoulder with ease.

The big black dog and the small black-and-white, who had been looking me over and sniffing my legs for several minutes, were now on friendly terms with me. Tom remarked it as he went up the path with our loads. It seemed to please him.

IV

THOMAS DEBLORE led me straight to the big front door, though the foot-worn path went off to the left and around a corner. From close up, the big house looked even older and more unkempt than it had from a distance. Thomas lowered his burden to the first of the three steps of stone which led up to the big door.

"It hasn't been kept up the way it should be," he said. "It's been neglected for years. Help's scarce." He glanced to his right and left. "This was all lawn, in the old days."

At that moment the door opened, disclosing to view a grotesque person. He stood on the threshold, with the dusk of the old hall behind him, staring at me with one hostile and inquisitive eye. The other eye was tight shut and sunken. He was of medium height, or better, very thin and sharply stooped from the hips. He looked ninety years old, at least; and all his remaining fire appeared to be concentrated in his left eye.

"Who you got thar?" he asked. "Whar'd 'e come from?"

"Who do you think?" retorted Deblore, with heat. "Not that it's any business of yours," he added.

The other cupped a hand behind an ear.

"I didn't kitch the name," he said. "Sing it out, Tom. I be a mite hard o' hearin' in one ear an' stone deef in t'other."

Deblore turned to me and said, "He's a liar. He's no more deaf than you nor me." And then, to Ruben, "It's Captain Gidwicke Swayton, who's been away to the war. He's kin to the Deblores from away back, an' he's come to stop with me just as long as he wants to. He's come by invitation—which is more than can be said for some others."

Thereupon, Deblore reshouldered his load, and barged by old Ruben, brushing him aside. I followed. The hall was narrow and dark and musty. We ascended the narrow staircase, each step of which was soft with dust. The handrail was slender and of mahogany. There was light at the top, from the open door of a front room. I followed Tom into this room; and he immediately deposited his load on the floor and shut the door.

"We live mostly in the wing," he said. "It's warmer—but this'll be warm enough from now on till winter. You can make a fire if you ever feel chilly." He stepped closer and whispered, "We'll be rid of old Rube Glashner before winter, if I have to kill him."

"Why do you whisper?" I asked.

"So he won't hear. He's spyin' at the door, like as not."

"Spying? What does he want to know? And if that's his kind, why don't you kick him out?"

"Public opinion." His whiskers moved convulsively and his eyes flamed. "We're not popular; and if I turned that old fool out, there's no saying what might happen. He pretends a claim on me, because Henry married his daughter."

At that moment, something scratched at the door. Tom stepped over and opened it; and the big tawny dog stalked into the room. Tom closed the door and came back and shook my hand warmly.

"This is a good man, you see," he said, addressing the dog. "Good friend, Lion. You take care of him, d'y'understand?"

The dog regarded me fixedly for a few seconds, then wagged his great brush and approached and sniffed my knees and disengaged hand. I patted his massive head, which was fully six inches wide between the ears.

"He doesn't look as old as I thought him," I said. "From the way he walks I got the idea he was on his last legs. He takes his time."

"Yes, he does that—when there's plenty of time. But when there's need of haste, he shows the speed. He's a great dog, Lion. Seven years old, and knows more than most men. Born and bred right in this house. I wouldn't be surprised if he grabbed old Ruben by the gizzard some day."

"What is he?" I asked.

"That I can't say, exactly. There's some Newfoundland in him, and maybe some wolf, and I don't know what else. But it's what you might call a fixed strain, now. He weighs a hundred and forty, all bone and muscle."

Deblore and I spent the balance of the morning in walking over the cleared areas of the estate. We were accompanied by the big black dog and the small black-and-white. I asked why Lion was not with us, and was told that one or other of the large dogs was always left to help old Amy Bear guard the house, and that, since

Ruben Glashner's arrival, Lion had always done the duty. "He's up to some mischief, and Lion knows it as well as I do," explained Deblore. "Duster's a good dog, but not sharp enough for that old cuss."

"What mischief can he possibly be up to?" I asked.

"I wish I knew," was the reply, given without an accompanying glance. "I wouldn't put anything past him."

We visited old Sol Bear at the plowing on the ridge. Sol looked like a pure-bred Indian; but what man, old or young, of unmixed Malisect blood, would work on a farm day after day, month after month, year in and year out? Deblore assured me that Sol did so.

"There isn't a lazy bone, nor an unreliable one, from his scalp down to his heels," he said. "And it's the same with Amy. They've been with me going on eight years, so I know."

Sol paused in his work for long enough to shake hands with me unsmilingly, fill his pipe from my pouch with an air of profound gravity and nod gravely to a question or two from his employer. Then he dropped his hands again to the sweat-polished curves of the plow-handles, clicked his tongue to the horses and resumed his unwinding of rusty stubble into straight brown furrows.

Tom, old Glashner and I ate our midday meal at a small table in a corner of the big dining-room. There were only two places set at this table when the master and I took our seats, and for a moment I feared that Amy Bear was not pleased with my arrival. Tom said nothing, however, and served me to bacon and eggs from a cracked platter with a large crested spoon of massive silver. Then Ruben came in and fairly bored a hole in the table with his single eye.

"Looks like the squaw'd forgot all about you, Mr. Swayton," he said. "Or maybe she can't count. But crows kin count up to three."

"Don't fool yourself, Glashner," said Tom. "Amy can count; and there is no danger of her ever forgetting her duty. If you're still here, fetch yourself a plate. There's still plenty to eat, praise the Lord!"

"Hey? What d'ye say?" cried the unwelcome guest, cupping a hand behind one of his leathery ears.

"Fetch yourself a plate, if you want any dinner," bawled the host, his beak-like nose reddening suddenly and blue fire playing from his eyes. "You know where the plates are kept, I guess—and everything else in the house. If you don't, it isn't for lack of looking."

I expected a counter blast from Ruben, but nothing of the kind occurred. Ruben wagged his head with a puzzled air, then fetched a plate from a cupboard with the manner of one who does not know what all the talk is about, but is anxious to do his best in the way of guessing. Fortified by his pretended deafness—a pretence which he could not fail to realize as futile—he reminded me of the legendary ostrich with his head in the sand. Tom helped him generously to bacon and eggs. For a little while we ate without further speech—but not in silence.

"I be a child of nature," said Ruben presently, turning his one eye on me. "A simple child of nature. I don't pertend to no gentility. I live simple an' eat plain an' drink water an' tea. If ye was to offer me a fortune of money, I wouldn't take it. It's the animals knows how to live. I kin jump into the snow, stark naked, any winter mornin', an' feel all the better for it. With a rub of b'ar's grease into my j'ints I'm fit an' ready for thirty miles of rough goin' any day. Yes, sir, it's the wild beasts knows how to live—rough an' simple."

Deblore snorted. His whiskers moved convulsively. He turned to me.

"You've seen wild animals rubbing bear's grease into their joints," he said. "It's a common sight hereabouts. Damn the fellow! Water and tea! He'd drink the alcohol off a pickled lizard in a museum."

I felt both amused and embarrassed. Ruben, however, didn't turn a hair. If Deblore had been a fly on the windowpane he would not have been less regarded.

"I got only one eye, but I kin see as far as most," bragged the thick-hided old parasite. "When I had 'em both I was as good as a telescope. It was envy an' unchristian jealousy lost me t'other one. I'll tell 'e all about how it happened. What's fer puddin', Tom?"

"If it was poisoned figs with arsenic sauce, you'd be welcome to every spoonful of it," said Deblore.

"Thanky, thanky," returned Glashner. "Dried apples is reel healthy, even if we

do have 'em every day. The squaw ain't much on variety. But as I was sayin'——"

Amy Bear entered with a large steamed pudding, which she deposited before Tom. Its filling was of dried apples; but old Ruben accepted a large helping of it, slithered it thickly with butter and brown sugar and didn't resume his story until his plate was polished. He sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"It was on Greenwater Brook," he began again. "I was choppin' for Hicks an' Ford. In them days I could fell as much timber in a day as any other two men on the river; an' I reckon I could hold me own with the best of 'em even now. The boss driv 'em to keep up with me, but it was more'n they was able to do——"

"Come on!" exclaimed Tom, jumping from his chair and grabbing me by the shoulder. "Lies, every word! Hot air! Let's get out of here!"

I went with him. Outside, he said, "He's the world's champion liar. The truth about his eye is, he did so little work the other men in the camp got sore at him—Sol told me the story—and one of them got hold of his pipe when he wasn't looking and put in a charge of gunpowder under the heel of tobacco. It was intended as a joke—quite a common trick in the lumber camps in those days—but the amount of explosive that was put in that time exceeded the bounds of humor. He smoked down to it, and it blew his eye out. Hard luck—that it didn't blow his head clean off."

"If I disliked him as you do, I'd run him out of the house and off the place," I said.

He shook his head gravely. "The fools around here would set fire to the barns. They are looking for an excuse to do something of the kind."

"But did they attempt anything of that sort in your brother Henry's time?"

"No: They were afraid of Henry. They are not afraid of me. I've never done them any harm, but they are my enemies, to a man."

TOM went back with an axe on his shoulder, to chop alders out of the corners of a pasture. Sol drove the team afield. Old Ruben took a nap on the big settle in the kitchen, with a red handkerchief over his ugly face. I went up to my room to unpack my dunnage. It was a slow task, owing to the broken blisters on my hands. I was still at it, when a slight sound caused me to glance up, and there was Amy Bear in the room, within two yards of me, with a finger on her lip for silence. I looked my astonishment. She nodded her head, backed and closed the door noiselessly. She was fat and elderly, but her moccasined feet were like feathers.

"What is the trouble?" I asked, in guarded tones.

She came close. "Glashner," she whispered. "Damn bad man. Devil. But you don't tell Tom what I tell you. Maybe he'd kill 'im an' git hung."

"What have you to tell me?"

"You know Lion. Good dog, an' very cute. He watch Glashner all day; an' Glashner don't like it too much. Today I see Glashner t'row Lion one big piece of meat—but Lion, he don't touch 'im. I pick 'im up an' burn 'im in the stove."

"What about it?"

"Pizen."

"Do you mean to say he would poison that dog, that the meat was poisoned? How do you know? Did you see it on the meat?"

"Know Glashner. Lion watch 'im all the time an' make 'im mad."

"What is he here for? What does he want?"

She shook her head. "You watch 'im, but don't tell Tom about the meat. Tom, he git mad p'raps an' kill 'im an' git hung."

"I'll keep an eye on the old bounder," I promised.

V

AFTER the conversation with Amy Bear, I took a stroll around the barns and yards. The dogs, Duster and Spud were afield with Deblore, and Lion was indoors somewhere, doubtless keeping an eye on old Ruben. By this time I firmly believed Glashner to be less than half-witted, and something more than a suspicion of his being dangerously insane was growing in me. I felt sorry for Tom Deblore. Public opinion and conditions for which he was not personally responsible had forced upon him as a guest a man whose character and habits and appearance were all equally objectionable, who was obviously and by report a hardened liar, whose attitude was unmistakably that of a spy or, at best, an impertinent meddler, and whose mental processes were

quite evidently defective. He was a menace as well as a danger. I wondered that, with those eyes and that beak, Tom had not already lost his self-control and floored the fellow with the handiest piece of furniture.

I took a turn around the barns, then sloped around, through a bit of old orchard, to the front of the house. I noticed that a shutter at one of the ground-floor windows was ajar that had been tight shut in the morning. I have a quick eye for that sort of thing. I stepped close and looked in. The lower sash was raised. For a moment I could see nothing, so obscure was the interior, but presently my eyes adjusted themselves to the gloom so that bulking pieces of furniture took shape and wide expanses of carpeted floor became evident. I saw, to my right, a bulging chimney and the maw of a vast fireplace, and before the hearth something large that moved slightly.

This something was the huge tawny dog, Lion, who sat looking at me over a shoulder. He wagged his brush on the floor, but did not shift his ground. He sat with his front to the fireplace. I waited; and the dog moved his head again into line with his body. He cocked an ear. I heard a slight sound from the chimney; and a small dark cloud, as of soot, puffed from the fireplace. The dog stood up and backed off a few paces. There was more sound of the same scraping character, and more puffs of soot hazed across the fireless hearth and into the dusky room. Lion backed farther and moved aside and submerged himself in heavy shadow. Something moved in the black of the chimney and immediately issued into view in a floating veil of black dust, stooped and staggering. It was old Ruben Glashner. He had both hands raised to his face; and his shoulders jerked to the recoil of partially suppressed sneezes and coughs. I withdrew from the window.

Half an hour later, Ruben joined me where I sat on the top rail of the orchard fence.

"Hev ye saw the yeller dog?" he asked.

I glanced over my shoulder. "There he is, at the kitchen door," I said. "You two seem to be great friends—inseparable."

His reply to that was a string of oaths.

"A remarkable dog," I continued.

"Dog?" he cried. "He's a devil!"

"You have a black smudge on your face, Mr. Glashner," I said.

He started, staring at me. He rubbed a gnarled hand over his face.

"And your hands are worse than your face," I continued. "Where have you been? What have you been doing? Cleaning out a stove? Or up a chimney?"

His gaze flickered aside from mine. His Adam's apple went up and down. Presently he stole a slanting glance back at me, slanted and swift.

"I wouldn't wonder—" he began, only to pause and stare at the nearest old apple tree. "I wouldn't wonder—" he repeated; and again his dry voice caught in his throat. His claw-like hands trembled on the top rail. Again he shot an oblique glance at me.

"What wouldn't you wonder?" I asked.

"Maybe ye ain't sich a fool as ye look," he said.

His voice was anxious, reflective, without suggestion of irony.

I laughed. "You must excuse me," I said. "You must work out the answer to that for yourself."

He faced me then and blinked at me. The expression of his one eye and weathered face was grave, anxious and crafty.

"Now looky here, Mr. Swayton, ye be young an' eddicated," he said. His voice was earnest and eager, yet fearful. "Young, an' rich like as not. An' ye'd come here to rob an old man. If I was in yer boots—young an' rich an' eddicated—I'd think shame of meself."

I glanced aside; for I had made up my mind to play up to the old fellow, in the hope of discovering his game. So I shifted my eyes and held my tongue.

"I'd think shame," he continued. "Rich an' eddicated—an' ye l'arn what he don't know, readin' in old family papers, maybe, an' come back here into the woods to take what don't belong to 'e. Or maybe it ain't so easy to find as ye figgered on? But I knowed what ye was after the minute I see yer face. Nothin' else would fetch ye into Moosemedders to live with the likes of Tom Deblore."

He paused; and I maintained my silence. He chuckled. He laid a hand on my arm. "I'll watch ye," he said. "Ye can't lay a finger on it without me knowin'. Ye know, and ag'in maybe ye don't know, bein' it's so long since it was wrote down—that thar old letter. Things has changed in all them years—trees an' the like, an' even parts of the house, maybe—landmarks. Ye won't find it easy, that's my opinion, not workin' all alone by yerself; an' I'll watch ye every minute—no need to be hostile. Two heads is better'n

one. What d'ye say to us two workin' together?"

I laughed. "That would be all right for you, but perhaps I'm not such a fool as I look," I said. "But I'll give you one item of information that may save you a lot of trouble in the future. What you are hunting for isn't up a chimney."

He fairly shook with rage and disappointment, but he turned and walked back to the house without another word. As he neared the kitchen door he picked up a stick of stove-wood and hurled it at Lion. The big dog side-stepped it easily, without loss of dignity.

I left the orchard fence and went in search of Deblore. Guided by the sound of his axe, I soon found him where he was busy chopping out alders and young water-birches from the corner of a pasture. At sight of me he sank his axe in a root and let it stand, pulled on his coat, sat down and lit his pipe.

"What's old Glashner looking for?" I asked.

"Trouble," he answered, and wriggled his whiskers.

"He might find enough of that without going up the chimney," I returned; and I told of what I had seen through the window, and of our conversation at the edge of the old orchard. Tom was furious, and he made no effort to conceal the fact. Also, he was uneasy. He quite obviously tried to divert my attention from his anxiety with the violence of his rage. What he named old Ruben was as strong as anything of the kind I have ever heard—strong enough, one would think, to skin the ears and blister the back of the neck at five hundred yards. He ceased only when his vocabulary failed him.

"What is it that he thinks I know about?" I asked. "His mention of old family papers? What was he driving at?"

"How should I know? The man's mad!"

"You have set the big dog to watch him?"

"Certainly. He might set the house afire. He's dangerous."

"Is there some old legend about a hidden treasure, or anything of that sort? Lunacy is not creative. It requires something to work on, to distort or exaggerate—so I've read somewhere."

"Hidden treasure? Where'd you get that notion, Gidwicke? Captain Kidd was never as far inland as this. No, Glashner's stark crazy, I tell you; and what he imagines he's looking for I haven't the faintest idea. But it's just as likely to be the foot of the rainbow as anything else. But he's dangerous—and I wish he was dead and buried. I've set Lion to watch him. That dog has more brains than most men. And I advise you to keep an eye on him, too, Gidwicke, for if he thinks you know anything about whatever it is he thinks he's hunting for, he'll try to get the knowledge out of you, by hook or by crook."

"I believe you. But I wish you wouldn't call me Gidwicke. Call me Swayton, or Giddy. Gidwicke always makes me feel as if I had been making a fool of myself. But about Lion. The dog is a wonder, I admit, but the old man is crafty. He knows that the dog is watching him. I feel afraid for the dog. He's a good dog; and you have set him a dangerous task."

Tom Deblore's prominent eyes seemed to protrude even farther than was usual with them, and a daunting glow illumined them.

"If he was to harm that dog, I'd kill him like a rat," he said, in a tone that carried conviction. "Like a rat? Like a murderer. I'd walk right up to him and drive a knife into him."

"And be hanged by the neck for murder," I returned. "The thing to do, Cousin Tom, is to get that old fellow out of the house and keep him out. There is surely some way of causing him to leave of his own free will. We must think of a way of getting rid of him without exciting the hostility of your neighbors to violence."

Deblore shook his head. "I've been working on that ever since he came," he replied. "I've let him see that I don't want him here, as you may have noticed, but he's got no self-respect."

"I'll try to think of something," I promised.

My private papers, my only papers, are of but little value even to myself; but they have accumulated with the years; and at the time of which I write they formed quite an important-looking collection in a battered Gladstone bag. The bag was without a key. There were a number of maps of my wanderings in the collection, both trench and ordinary, old notebooks, rolls of platoons and gun-crews long since

shot to pieces or demobilized, worthless old letters, and several uncompleted papers on the migration of caribou and kindred subjects. My papers were unimportant, as I have said; but I knew exactly where each one of them was to be found in the collection, and the look and the feel of it.

Five days passed without any notable incident. I plowed, cut out bushes and mended fences. Old Glashner continued to pretend to be deaf to Deblore's insults and to keep an eye on me whenever I was in or near the house, and the dog, Lion, continued to watch old Glashner. Nothing happened.

On the morning of the sixth day, a line from one of my poetic efforts popped into my head even while I was in the act of pulling on my boots. It was a good line and it called for the next—but I had forgotten the next. I drew the old Gladstone bag from beneath the bed and opened it; and I knew that my papers were out of order the moment I set my hand on them. I looked them over swiftly. Not only were they out of order, but three were missing. My memory identified the missing papers in a moment. One was a map by my own hand of a small section of a certain trench system long since crumbled in; another was an old letter from my mother; and the third was a page of "figuring," a vain effort, in the neat hand of an enterprising person whose lost salmon-rod factory had absorbed my modest patrimony. No one of them could possibly be of any interest or value to anybody in the world. For a moment I suspected rats of having carried them off for the lining of a nest; but, upon second thought, realized that rats do not open and close Gladstone bags.

After breakfast, I went afield with Deblore, Sol Bear, the horses and the lesser dogs. I told Deblore of the missing papers.

"Glashner," he said.

"But a glance would have shown him that they were of no use," I protested.

"He can't read," said Tom. "I know. He's taken away all he could lay hands on of my papers. He always returns them. He takes them to some house in the settlement, or somebody meets him halfway—someone who can read. He isn't working alone. He isn't the only fool 'round here—the only fool and knave."

Just then the big dog, Lion, joined us, wagging his fine brush. We patted him, and Duster and Spud leaped about him.

"You see!" said Deblore. "Glashner must be at least a quarter of a mile from the house. Lion never follows him farther than that, but he'll pick him up again before he gets back. And you'll find those papers in your bag again tomorrow morning, and others gone for inspection."

"That's not a bad idea," I said, and chuckled.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"Something I just now thought of. I'll tell you later—as I go along. Or you'll see for yourself. What are these moosemeadows? Are they lakes—or what?"

"They were lakes, ponds, once upon a time, I believe. Thousands of years ago, it must have been. There are patches of open water in them still, full of pond-lilies. The rest is filled up with mud and moss and hardhack growing thick as hair on a dog's back."

"I'd like to see them. The sooner the better. What about today?"

"They'll be spongy for quite a while yet. You wouldn't see much but desolation and wild ducks. They dry out pretty well during the summer, though there's always water underneath and at the air-holes. That's when the moose come out and feed there—walk right over the hardhack, mind you, and feed on the lily-roots. But what's the bright idea, Giddy?"

"You'll get it in time — before Glashner does, I hope. Will you take me to the Moosemeadows now? I want to give them the once-over."

"I wouldn't go that far from the house under the circumstances—Ruben Glashner—for ten thousand dollars. But don't let that stop you, Giddy. It's no trick to find them from here. There are two of them, north and south. Four miles back from the house, due east, will bring you to the western edge of North Meadow. That's just about on my rear line. I edge over a few hundred yards into the hardhack."

VI

I SET out for the moosemeadows half an hour later, accompanied by the black dog Duster. I had ham sandwiches and gingerbread in my pockets—and other things. I wore well oiled

trench-boots. What with the sunshine and my bright idea, I felt light-hearted. I felt myself to be more than a match for a dozen old fools like Ruben Glashner. An old woodroad led me three miles on my way, through tall timber; and from that point forward I followed a ghost of a track through tangled underbrush and over rotted blow-downs. I broke clear at last, and looked out upon a scene of desolation which even the sun of a May morning could not enliven. Brown and gray and flat and set in a low black rim, the hardhack spread for miles to the east and north and south. Here were miles, thousands of acres, of life which looked like death, and death which fed that life. Far out a few crows flew, their black wings gleaming in the sunshine like burnished metal. Farther out, beyond the flapping crows, a circular space of open water flashed like glass.

I felt depressed. I sat down on an outjut of mossy rock and lit a cigarette.

"I've seen barrens and swamps and battlefields, but this wins," I said.

The dog whined as if in agreement, sat down against my leg and looked out across the hardhack. The crows came ashore. A brown hawk went cruising over, flying low.

The level of the dreary waste was broken in five places within my range of vision. Two of these breaks were clumps of bushes and saplings lifted from four to five feet above the grim hardhack and tinted yellow and green with bloom and leaf; two others were solitary pines, half-grown and worse than half-dead, stooped like lost travelers in a desert; and the fifth was a knoll like a tiny island in that tideless sea, topped by a tall shaft of timber, gray as an old bone. This, after the expanse of open water farther out, was the most prominent mark in my range of vision on that vast waste. The timber was what is locally known as rampike—a gigantic pine, long dead and long since denuded of its crown and limbs and bark, hollow and crumbled within, but weathered to the toughness of horn without. This landmark stood at a distance of about three hundred yards from where I sat.

I produced my field-glasses from my pocket and studied the knoll and the rampike in detail. Good glasses, these. I saw juts of granite, mossy knobs, a tangle of brush and fallen timber around the base of the ancient shaft, and scars in the gray shell where the great limbs had been torn out by wind and frost and time. I noted one of these scars in particular. By its size, I judged it to have been the socket of one of the mightiest limbs of that once mighty tree. From there I swung my magnified glance slowly to right and left, then pocketed the glasses and produced compass and notebook. Duster left my side to scout around; and in a minute he had struck an interesting scent and gone away on it. His eager yelps receded swiftly to the northward. I made a few jottings, slowly, thinking hard, smiling at my thoughts. I felt better. By the inner light of my brightening idea, the scene before me lost something of its desolate significance.

I ventured out on the surface of the waste. I sank slowly to the tops of my boots in the wiry growth; and it quaked around me like stiff jelly. Lifting a sunk foot, I saw that I had not reached water. I moved forward, setting the hardhack a-tremble for yards on every side with every step. Faint murmurs and squashy sobs arose from the depths. My progress was slow, for I was afraid of coming upon a weakness in the mat of quaking vegetation. I had not gone far, and had paused to light a cigarette, when that sense which is not of eye, ear, nose or fingers warned me that I was under observation. I completed the lighting of the pipe, drew several slow puffs—then turned in my sunken tracks like a flash. But nothing showed of my observer. The edge of bush and wood disclosed nothing. My footmarks had been erased from the hardhack over and into which I had trod knee-deep. But I knew that I was still being watched by human eyes. I proceeded to retrace my steps; and when halfway back to my point of departure, I whistled shrilly for the dog. I heard him barking, far away on my right. I whistled again. The barking ceased, and the sensation of being watched left me. My right hand was in the right-hand pocket of my coat. I saw the top of an alder shaking on my left-front; and I jerked my hand from my pocket and fired two shots.

The reports startled me back to reason and time and place. Now I stood staring, dismayed at my impulsive act, sinking slowly into the quaking, elastic hardhack. The alder had ceased to shake. I pocketed the pistol, pulled up my feet and went ashore. I forced my way cautiously and anxiously through the bushes to the mark at which I had fired. There was the alder; but, to my great relief, there was nothing else. The ground was matted

with moss and deadwood and tufts of sprouting coarse grasses. I did not find a footprint, nor any mark of blood. I was glad of the lack of blood-sign, for the thought that the shaker of the alder may have been Tom Deblore himself had been

with me ever since the shooting. I was about to turn away when Duster joined me. He circled the alder, with his nose to the ground, whined, yelped and dashed off to the northward. After a moment's hesitation, I whistled him back. He came reluctantly.

It was mid-afternoon when I got back to the old house. Deblore and Sol Bear were afield, Amy Bear was in the kitchen sewing patches on an old coat, Ruben Glashner was asleep in an armchair in a corner of the big dining-room, and Lion lay just outside the dining-room door, with one eye open. I told Amy Bear to tell old Glashner, should he awake and question her, that I had not yet returned. She nodded her head, with a brightening of dark eyes. I tiptoed to the front of the house and soon found the library. It was across the musty hall from the big drawing-room. It smelled of mildew and dryrot. All the wall space not occupied by chimney and windows and doors was covered with glazed bookcases. Several of the shelves were empty, and there were gaps in others, and hundreds of books lay scattered about the rotten old carpet.

By the thin ray of my electric torch I soon found what I had come in the hope of discovering. From an ancient volume bound in sheepshkin I cut a time-browned fly-leaf. With this, I retired to my room upstairs and locked myself in. For fifteen minutes I worked on a page of my notebook. Then I emptied my fountain-pen of ink, dipped it in diluted iodine and copied from the notebook onto the time-stained paper which I had brought from the library.

I contemplated my work with satisfaction. The paper was brown with age and the strokes and jots of the pen were brown as a mummy. Here was something for old Ruben Glashner and his unknown confederate to busy themselves with. Here was a "family paper" for their best attention.

I investigated the contents of the Gladstone bag and saw that the missing papers had not yet been replaced. Inserting the fly-leaf from the old book into the collection, I let myself out—leaving the door open behind me—and went for a walk.

I found Tom Deblore sowing oats, with Sol Bear and the harrows after him. He sowed from a basket that was slung at his left side by a broad strap across his shoulder. He halted at the end of the tillage and lowered the basket and fished up his pipe from a hip-pocket.

"What did you do?" he asked. "Any adventures?"

"I think I've started something," I replied. "We'll see less of that old crocodile, for a few days at least, or I miss my guess. I've planted something among my private papers that should keep him wading about in that hardhack and scratching through the woods for a while."

"That will be a relief, however you've fixed it."

I produced my notebook and showed him the rough draft of my work and told of the copy done with diluted iodine on time-stained paper. He studied the page with flattering attention, turning it this way and that, wrinkling his eyebrows and twitching his whiskers.

"What suggested this to you, Giddy?" he asked, lifting his gaze suddenly and keenly to my face.

"The old man's behavior—his talk to me, his climb up the chimney and his search of my papers," I answered.

"Nothing else?"

"What else, in heaven's name!"

"True, true—but it is very good. I almost believe it myself. You are to be congratulated. L P? What does that stand for?"

"Large pine. You know the old ram-

pike standing up there about three hundred yards out in the hardhack."

"Yes. Very good. And 1 b?"

"Large branch. The socket-hole still shows. There must have been a branch there in the old days."

"That's so. And what about these marks?"

"That's what old Ruben will want to know. He'll have a busy time finding out."

"Aren't there any marks?"

"Of course there are not any marks—except the rampike."

"All this is pure invention? It is hard to believe. The fact is, you know—or you don't know—there's been talk of hidden treasure for generations. You've never heard of it, Gidwicke?"

"Never—except from old Ruben, and now from you."

"There has always been talk of it. I did not tell you so before. I wondered if you knew. Perhaps I shared old Glashner's suspicion; but now I know you better and trust you absolutely. But there's nothing in it. The first Deblore here was a very wealthy man. His children hadn't so much, though they had plenty. That's what started the stories, I suppose; and they have been growing ever since, naturally. What do you think?"

"I think that's quite likely."

"Yes, that's my idea; but on the other hand, if there ever has been a hidden treasure, it has been found. Henry always believed in it. That is why he encouraged me to go abroad as a youth—wanted to hunt for it in peace and single-handed. Henry found either the treasure, or proof positive that it had never existed, or he would still be here at Moosemeadows."

"But I've been told that he had to go, and go in a hurry, to save his life."

"The matter of knifing the shopkeeper. You didn't know Henry. He either wouldn't have run away from the hostile demonstration, or he had solved the mystery of the treasure and was ready to go. Nothing could scare Henry Deblore. He was as brave as he was ruthless. And he was clever. Had his nature been different, he would have been a great man. He left Moosemeadows Park of his own free will, despite appearances. He wrote me that I was the rightful owner, and exactly where to lay my hand on the true will; and when he received word from me that I was on my way, he threw a knife into Pete Higgley for a long-standing grudge and made an easy getaway. When the scum around here tell you that they chased him home, don't you believe it. They didn't come within gunshot of the house until they were quite sure that he was out of it. They were scared of him to the last. Henry was a bad man. You are one of the family, and you'll be my heir, so I'm frank with you—and you knew it, anyway. He wasn't respected—but, by the Lord, he was feared!"

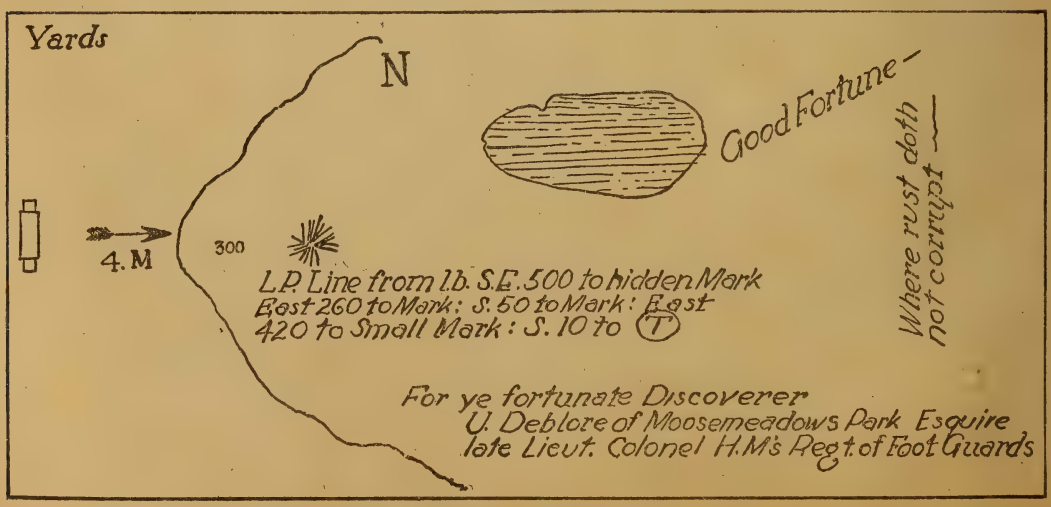
"What was his grudge against the storekeeper?"

"Higgley always pretended that he wasn't afraid of him."

"So he tried to kill him!"

"Undoubtedly. But not until he had decided to leave the country. He was not one to move except of his own free will. He took several of the best of the old pieces of family plate with him, by the way—and a number of the heirlooms of

CAPTAIN SWAYTON'S MAP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For ye fortunate Discoverer
U. Deblore of Moosemeadows Park Esquire
late Lieut. Colonel H.M's Regt. of Foot Guards

gold and precious stones, as well, so far as I can reckon them up. Henry didn't go away a pauper, you may be sure; nor he didn't run away before he was ready to go, you can bet on that. I wish these louts were half as scared of me as they were of Henry. I wish old Glashner was. I've heard that Henry had that old blackguard —his own father-in-law, mark you—crawling on his prayer-handles to him."

"He must have been a formidable character."

"He was all of that. But does Ruben know that you have been to North Meadow?"

"I don't know if he does or not—but somebody does. Somebody took a look at me from the bush, but got away without showing himself."

Tom wagged his head. "We are surrounded by spies," he said. "Damn their insolence! All hostile, too. It's no joke being a Deblore nowadays in this neck of woods. I'm a peaceful man, and an honest one—but I'll stick to my inheritance! I've never given any man or woman or child in this country cause to hate or despise me. It is hard, unjust. But I'm here till death takes me—or hell freezes over. And Sol and Amy are with me."

"So am I, if that's any comfort to you," I said.

We shook hands impulsively, but I didn't tell him about the two shots I had let fly at the shaking alder.

VII

UPON rising next morning, I immediately inspected the contents of the Gladstone bag. The papers that had been absent were back in their places. The iodined fly-leaf from the old book was gone.

After breakfast, Deblore asked, "Did you notice old Glashner?"

I replied that I had looked at him several times during breakfast, hoping to see him swallow his knife, but had noticed nothing unusual.

"He's mad with excitement," Tom whispered. "He was shaking with it. I thought he'd bite the side out of his cup. And he didn't talk. He knew that if he talked he'd say too much. Is your trap sprung?"

"Yes; and the bait is gone."

"That's it! We won't see much of him today; and Lion will be off duty. That was smart of you, Giddy. We'll find him amusing—and that's a thing I never dreamed of. He and his confederate will be kept busy all summer, clawing around in the woods and the hardhack, looking for hidden marks and counting their steps. It was a bright idea."

"Who is his confederate?" I asked.

"I haven't the faintest notion. It might be any of a dozen of the people of the settlement. There are a few who wouldn't

stoop to associate themselves with Ruben unless they were sure there was money in it. He's not highly respected, you know. But even Deacon Trim would go into partnership with him if he was sure that there was money in it and a chance of injuring a Deblore into the bargain. But I suspect that his confederate is half-witted, like himself. The general opinion is that the treasure, if any, has been found by Henry."

"I think I'll visit around among our delightful neighbors today. I may hear something."

"You'll wish you hadn't, Giddy. If you hear anything, it'll be unpleasant. You'll find yourself to be as unpopular in the settlement as I am. You'll be insulted, lad. Better keep away from them."

"Do you know Jacques Jeanbard?"

"Jules Jeanbard's son. Yes, I've seen him; and I believe he's the best of them. A returned soldier. Jules isn't a bad fellow, either—Old Jules the Fiddler. The Jeanbards are French. They haven't the hatred of the Deblores in their blood, as the others have."

The Jeanbard farm lay on this side, above the junction of Deadhorn Brook and Wicklow Creek, and nearer the Deblore estate than any other farm in the settlement by several miles. Tom told me this, and of landmarks to recognize it by; and he advised me to go by canoe and not to intrude any farther into the settlement than the house of Old Jules the Fiddler. I went away in the patched bark canoe from the bushes beside the steep path.

I was curious about Ruben Glashner's confederate. I was curious to know if one of my two shots had found a mark. I had heard no cry, I had found no blood-stain, but a suspicion that I had nicked something more than sappy wood was growing in me.

The creek still ran high and strong, though it had fallen several feet since my ascent in company of Stack Glashner. I plied a lazy paddle, but made good time. I had food in my pocket, in case the Jeanbards should fail to invite me to dinner. I hoped that they would not fail. I wanted friendliness, and a chance to swap yarns about the war with another old soldier. Six miles slid easily along, and I picked up the landmarks without difficulty—a lightning-gashed hemlock on one bank, and opposite it a big cedar bowed almost to the water. I saw a path, but no sign of a clearing. I ran the old canoe into the mud, climbed the path and followed it through a belt of big spruces and thick underbrush; and there lay a little clearing with a little house squatted in the middle of it. The house was of big squared timbers, whitewashed. The door and window trimmings were red. There was also a barn of squared logs with a red door. The butt of a straw-stack, a gigantic pile of wood, and a gaily-painted bird-house on a tall pole completed the farmstead. About half the clearing was plowed and newly harrowed, smoke rose from the chimney of the house and hens scratched in the barnyard, but there was no human being in sight. I advanced from the screen of underbrush, hoping for the best. Knowing my pride and temper as I did, I feared the consequences of any sort of incivility on the part of the Jeanbards.

The door opened while I was yet twenty paces from it, and a little yellow dog came dashing out, barking furiously. But I paid no attention to the dog, for a woman stood in the doorway; and I had not reckoned on meeting a woman. I did not like it, for what can a man do when a woman is uncivil; and even as I raised my cap I tried to think of an excuse for turning around and retracing my steps. Then a second glance heartened me. The woman did not look unfriendly. She whistled to the dog, who was now yapping at my heels. The dog paid no attention to her whistle and I continued to ignore the dog.

"He won't bite you," she said. "He doesn't mean anything—but he hasn't been trained right."

"I'm sure he is all that a dog should be," I said, with my best smile, and wishing at the same time that I had shaved that morning. "Is Mr. Jacques Jeanbard in—or anywhere about?"

"He is working back, and so is father," she replied. "But please come in. They'll be home by half-past eleven."

"I'm from Moosemeadows Park," I said.

She blushed slightly, and replied, "You are Captain Swayton, I know. Stack Glashner was here and told us about you."

When the male Jeanbards arrived on the scene, I was grinding the mangle at the edge of the washtub while the lady of the house was feeding it with the last items of the family wash. Both the men were tall and dark, the father bearded, the son clean-shaven. They halted just inside the kitchen and stared. Rose laughed. (Rosamund was her name.) I had my coat off, my sleeves rolled up and a checked apron tied round me; and I felt that I looked a bit of an ass.

"My name is Swayton," I said.

They shook hands with me cordially. Then Jacques turned to his sister and whispered something, with an air of protest. She laughed lightly and glanced at me.

"I smell somethin' burnin'," said the father.

Jacques strode to the stove, opened the oven door and retreated before a cloud of pungent smoke.

"Four apple pies!" cried Miss Jeanbard. "The last of the real apples! All burned to cinders!"

Jacques pulled them out one by one with the poker. They filled the kitchen with biting smoke. The little dog went out, and Jacques sneezed.

"It's the first mess of cookin' she's burned since she come home to keep house for us," said the father.

"It's my fault," I said. "I smelled something some time ago, and should have mentioned it; and I should not have called in the morning."

"It ain't your fault, Captain," said Jacques sternly. "You didn't put the pies in the oven. You didn't even know they were there. I don't give a hang about the pies, but she shouldn't have set you to mangling the wash; not the first time she met you, anyhow. That's being too darned informal."

"But I wanted to help," I protested. "It made me feel that I was not in the way—not a stranger—at home."

"Did you do the washing at home, sir?" asked Jacques.

I was silent and Miss Jeanbard laughed at me. Then Jacques and I got to ex-

changing war yarns, and I learned he had come out of it with a commission.

We dined on cold roast beef and pickles, and the burned pies were replaced by strawberry preserves and cream. After dinner, I went back to a farther clearing with the men and horses. I spoke of old Ruben Glashner to Jacques, who replied that he had heard that the old bum was stopping at the big house. I assured him that Glashner wasn't welcome there, and that Deblore would throw him out but for fear of the hostility of the settlement. Jacques nodded his head gravely.

"Old Deblore is dead right," he said. "There are folks hereabouts who'd make even Ruben Glashner an excuse for harmin' him. That's what the most of them live for, it seems to me, though Tom Deblore never done—did—any hurt to anyone round these parts, that I've ever heard about. Pa and I don't hold with them in that. Ruben Glashner's the worst liar and thief in the province, and a nitwit into the bargain."

"He dipped into a bag of mine and carried off some of my private papers," I said. "He carried them off the premises, but afterwards returned them. He can't read a word. What's his game, do you suppose?"

"The devil only knows. He was born crooked, and he's put a few more twists in himself."

"I was wondering where he took the papers, to be read."

"Search me. He's crazy, you know. He must think you have some dope on that old treasure. If that's what he's hanging round the old place for, it's sure proof he's ripe for a madhouse."

"Was there ever a treasure? Deblore says that there has always been talk of one."

"If there ever was, something happened to it before Henry Deblore left the country, you can bet a month's pay on that, Captain. I don't remember much of Henry myself, except that I was scart stiff at the sight of him; but the old man knew him an' says he wasn't one to go away an' leave anything behind him."

"Do you know Sol and Amy Bear?"

"I've passed the time o' day with Sol once or twice. Old Tom's got friends in those two. They came to his house starving an' sick one winter night, from the Lord-knows-where, without a cent or a rind of bacon, with their snowshoes wore to a frazzle; and he took them in an' nursed and fed them. That was a good many years ago. Pa got the story straight from Sol himself, but Sol didn't tell where they come from, nor why."

An hour later, I left the men, after promising to call again before long, and headed back toward my canoe. Is it necessary for me to say that I did not pass the little house? As I issued from the woods onto the back of the clearing in which it stood, I saw that the wash was on the line. The next thing I saw was a stooped figure with a pack on its shoulder moving swiftly away from the house at an angle that would bring it to the creek slightly below my canoe. For a moment I thought it was Ruben Glashner. No, it was shorter than Ruben.

I found Rose Jeanbard in a rocking-chair by the window, reading. "I had a visitor," she said. "He asked me not to mention his visit to anybody, but I told him I'd tell the first person I saw, just to put him in his place. He is saucy. He gave me a terrible look."

"I saw him," I replied. "An old Johnny, wasn't he, with a pack?"

"Yes, he's old, and a peddler. He has been here before, within the past two weeks, selling things—but he called today for surgical aid."

"Surgical aid?"

"With a wound to be dressed. It was in his left hand."

"What sort of a wound was it? A cut?"

"No, a bullet wound. He was cleaning his pistol, which was loaded. I fixed it up for him, but I don't like him. He talks broken English. There is something queer about him—something false and dangerous. I don't know what it is."

I asked her if the peddler could read English, and she said that she did not know. After a moment's hesitation, I told her about old Ruben Glashner's spying around, of his liberties with my private papers, my visit to the nearest edge of the nearer moosemeadow, my nervous shock and my two hysterical shots at the shaking alder. "I may have potted that old bird," I concluded.

"You think that he may be old Ruben's confederate?" she queried.

"It is possible," I replied. "And if so, he'll have enough of that game before it is finished." And I told her of the trick I had played with the ancient fly-leaf and the iodine, and of how Ruben had bitten. She agreed with me that it was a bright idea. She said that she hoped the old peddler was really Ruben's confederate, for she

would like to think of him, picture him, toiling fruitlessly in the hardhack.

I moved on at last, found the canoe where I had left it and headed upstream. Is it necessary for me to state in so many exact words that Rose Jeanbard was not the sort of young woman I had expected to meet on Wicklow Creek? Consider it said.

Paddling with Wicklow Creek is one thing and paddling against it is another. I had to put my shoulders into the stroke. I did not strain myself, however, as I was not in a particular hurry. I thought a good deal in an agreeable, but confused vein which led to nothing but a feeling of friendliness toward the world in general and this part of it in particular.

When I got back to the old house, Ruben was abroad. Amy told me that she had seen nothing of him since nine in the morning. He turned up for supper, however, with a fine fishing story and two dozen trout. He appeared to be deafer than ever to Deblore's snorts and sneers. I felt the probing glance of his single eye on me frequently during the meal.

I went to bed early, but was wakened at midnight by a hand on my shoulder. There was Tom Deblore in his nightshirt, with a candle in his hand and a twinkle in his formidable eyes.

"The old spy has sneaked out again, Giddy," he exclaimed. "I had a suspicion he would, so I went to see. He's left his warm bed. You've got him on the hook, lad. Left his warm bed to go wading round in the hardhack on a fool's errand! Thought you'd like to know. Too good to keep till morning. Hope he steps into a bog hole."

He went away chuckling, and I sank back to my dreams.

First thing next morning, I opened the Gladstone bag. All my papers were there, including the artful expression of my bright idea. I examined that example of creative art proudly—and then moved to the window with it, where the light was better. It had been tampered with. I had to refer to my notebook from the pocket of my coat to be sure of it. A 260 had been altered to 480. It was cleverly done. Old Ruben's confederate was a craftsman of superior skill and lightness of touch. This evidence of the serious spirit in which my little effort at deception had been received filled me with pride.

"Old Ruben's friend is a cunning fellow," I reflected. "And he has a low opinion of my abilities as a treasure-hunter, and of my memory. So he sets me two hundred and twenty yards astray."

I returned the masterpiece to its place. Then I detached the rough draft from the notebook, burned it between my fingers and crumbled the thin flake of ash to powder. The joke was too good to spoil by the want of a little care. I was fully dressed when I discovered that my pistol was gone from the dressing-table, where I had laid it the night before. I searched around in other likely places, but failed to find it. This changed my mood. A joke was a joke; and would-be crafty old fools could take what liberties they chose with my papers, by night or by day, and fool themselves therewith to their heart's content—but a liberty with one's pistol is a very different thing.

"He can't get away with that!" I exclaimed, and made the long journey to the kitchen, where we always breakfasted heavily but informally. Deblore and the Bears were there.

"Our smart young friend is sleeping it off," Tom said to me. "He had a busy night. He'll have to rub a quart of grease into his joints if he keeps up this wild life much longer."

Amy's eyes twinkled, but Sol's face was impassive as wood.

Old Glashner appeared ten minutes later.

"I overslep'," he remarked as he sat down and reached for the fried trout. "Nothin' like fishin' to make 'e sleep."

"Work will do it, too," said Tom. "Are you going fishing again today? It looks like a good day for it."

"Sure I be," replied the other, forgetting his deafness. "We'll have trout for breakfust ag'in tomorrow."

"It seems to have helped your hearing," said Tom.

"I didn't git that," bawled Glashner. "What ja say?"

Tom laughed. The other wagged his head and returned his attention to the fried trout on his plate.

"It is of no use to you without the ammunition," I said suddenly, but in an ordinary tone of voice.

Everyone looked at me, including the deaf man.

"The ammunition is under lock and key," I continued.

Glashner resumed his knife-and-jaw work, and the others turned their inquiring glances from my face to his. I left my seat and went around to the other side of the table. I pulled the old man gently but firmly to his feet.

"I saw you fooling around my dressing-table," I said sternly. "But as the pistol is the only thing missing, I suppose it's the only thing you wanted. Well, you can't have it."

Many emotions shone and darkened in the old man's eye. Hate was there; and fear was there; suspicion, doubt, anger and disdain were there.

With one hand heavy on his shoulder, I felt his pockets with the other. I found the missing automatic and transferred it to my own pocket. He sneered, not a wit abashed.

"I only took it to look at," he said. "Yer welcome to it. I'd ruther have a rifle or a shotgun any day."

"It's a wonder you didn't take my watch," I said, with a fine show of indignation.

The look he gave me at that was almost pitying.

"I always knew you were a thief!" cried Deblore. "But I didn't think you'd try to put over such a raw deal as that. Rob my honored guest! That's a damn fine return to make me for my hospitality—and get caught with the goods right on you! I thought you were smart!"

Old Glashner resumed his seat and smiled. It was a knowing, disdainful and self-satisfied smile. He had failed to get away with my little gun, but he had confirmed his early suspicion of my simplicity.

"It wasn't nothin' but a friendly little joke," he cackled, and poured himself a second cup of coffee. "I wouldn't rob a smart young man, like the captain, not for a farm. But ye want to be real careful with that thar contraption, Captain. Ye might let it off accidental some time an' shoot yerself."

I DEVOTED that day to farming with Deblore and Sol Bear. Lion was with us, or about the house, all day, which was proof that Ruben was clear of the premises. But the old bounder came home in time for supper, with a string of fine trout. I locked my bedroom door that night and put the pistol under my pillow. In the morning, Tom informed me that Ruben had again spent the greater part of the night abroad.

"He's playing you for a sucker, Giddy," he said. "He's got a nasty shock coming to him. I guess he'll have a belly full of visiting me, and be content to go home, after he's spent a few more nights counting his steps out in the hardhack and digging for marks."

I remained at the table after Tom and Sol had left it and gone out. I was in no hurry to decide on my course for the day. I was reluctant to commit myself to a day of field work. Handling axe and bush-hook in a corner of a pasture is all very well under normal conditions—but I had other things on my mind. I felt a call from downstream; and, at the same time, my curiosity pricked me concerning the scene of old Glashner's midnight activities. I was smoking a cigarette with my last cup of coffee when the old rogue appeared. Though the table was cleared, Amy brought bacon and toast and the coffee pot from the stove and set them before the unwelcome guest without a word.

"How'd ye like to go fishin' with me today?" asked Ruben.

"No, thanks," I replied.

"Maybe ye be figgerin' on goin' by yerself?" he queried.

"Well, what about it? Do I have to ask permission of you?"

"I could tell 'e the likely places to git the big fellers."

"Is that so. Well, I'm not going fishing."

"Where be ye a-goin'?"

"None of your business!"

"Oh, all right, but thar ain't no call for ye to be so short about it."

I left the table. Glashner immediately laid down his knife and pushed back and came after me.

"A young feller like yerself maybe wouldn't object to seein' a purty young woman now an' ag'in," he said. "If so, I kin tell ye of four or five as purty gals as ye'd find anywhars in the Province, right downstream in Guards Settlement. Now if I was a young feller with plenty of time on me hands, I'd know how to spend a fine day like this here. I'd take me a canoe an' I'd la'nch her——"

I shook his hand from my arm and walked away.

But that is exactly what I did. I hesitated several times, 'tis true, wondering what his game could be—why he had suggested this thing to me. Was it that he wanted me out of the way, so that he could pace the hardhack to the eastward with a sense of complete security from interruption by a rival pacer? That was it, most

likely. Yes, that was it, undoubtedly. He wanted to place me well out of the way, so that he and his confederate might devote daylight and their undivided attentions to the unearthing of one of those hidden marks. This satisfied me; and yet, for some undefined reason, I hesitated even then. I went, however, after leaving word for Deblore with Amy Bear of my intended destination; and after stowing several spare clips of ammunition deep in a hip-pocket.

I swung out to mid-stream and kept to that course. Thus one catches the full run of the water. Keep close to a bank if you are working up, but if you are headed downstream take the crown of the road.

I plied a lazy paddle, leaving most of the work to the strong and willing water. I took things so easily that I did not even remove my coat. I was about three miles below the big house, or a little better than that, when the unexpected happened and snapped my mind awake from its pleasant wool-gathering. *A splinter suddenly appeared on the right-hand gunnel of the canoe,* standing straight up like a finger within a few inches of me, and at the same instant the thrill of swift impact went through my nerves and the report of a rifle smote my ears. But the splinter struck me as the most extraordinary thing of all. I stared at it, fascinated—but not for long, thank heaven! For long enough to count three, perhaps; and then my wits got to work. I rolled the canoe over, rolling myself with it. It was a cranky little

craft. It rolled quick. I was under water in a jiffy. Then I kicked clear and swam down and out. I swam hard, anxious to make as much distance as possible before being forced to the surface for a breath. Now I felt indignation and horror. I saw that sudden, significant splinter of wood as if it were still under my eye and realized what would have happened to me if the man with the rifle had not shot a few inches ahead of his mark. I would have been pierced through from hip to hip —for I had undoubtedly been his mark.

I came to the surface, gulped air, glanced ahead and submerged again. The water was unpleasantly chilly. My boots and water-soaked garments were unpleasantly heavy. I was glad to find myself, when I came up for another gulp of air, in a little eddy against the bank, among bushes and loitering scraps of drift-stuff. I secured a slippery and quaking foothold on the inside of a screen of brush and then, with only my head out of water, turned and looked back—all this with the utmost caution. The opposite bank was bushed to the water's edge; and no one showed there, and nothing moved. The canoe was far downstream, drifting bottom-up and low. Very slowly, very cautiously, I retreated from the water into the bushes. I crawled up the bank, through the thick and adequate cover of alders and willows and young firs, and so into the edge of the forest.

VIII

IT WAS fully two hours later, and within an hour of noon, when I returned to the top of the bank at a point opposite the Jeanbard place and looked cautiously out from cover. I was warm and dry by that time, having engaged in a great deal of unavoidable exercise since coming ashore five miles farther upstream. I had failed to find anything in the nature of a path. It had been rough footing all the way, over rocks and blow-downs and through tough tangles of underbrush. I saw no sign of human life. The surface of the hurrying stream was empty for as far as I could see up and down. But I was not t a k i n g any chances on again attracting the murderous attention of the person who had splintered the gunnel of the lost canoe. I retired again into thick cover and sat down and smoked. My cigarettes were wet, but the tobacco in my oiled silk pouch was dry. I smoked and thought the situation over and made up my mind to give old Ruben Glashner and his confederate evil for evil, shot for shot—and

then some more. They were afraid of me, afraid that I might upset their plans. They should have ample and just cause to fear me before I was through with them. I no longer saw the affair of the treasure-hunt in the light of a joke. It was a fight now. There would be enough action to make up for the lack of treasure. I would rid Moosemeadows Park of Ruben Glashner and his confederate; yes, and of his sympathizers and abettors—or dig their graves on the place.

I had not brought anything to eat in my pockets, being sure of the hospitality of the Jeanbards. I regretted this, but there was nothing to do about it just then. I overhauled the pistol, wiping it carefully. I refilled my pipe. I kept under cover and grew hungry and hungrier as the idle hours crawled up and dragged past. The sun drew to the western horizon at last, dipped a red edge behind black spruces and finally sank out of sight. The western red faded slowly and the clear twilight slowly thickened to dusk. I placed the pistol and two clips of cartridges in the oiled-silk pouch with my tobacco, wound and tied the pouch securely and buttoned it into a hip-pocket. Then I descended the bank with as little disturbance of the brush as possible, stepped into the chilly water without a splash, waded with scarcely a ripple and swam for the darkling shore opposite.

Light streamed from the windows of the kitchen of the little white house. Rose opened the door to my knock and stepped back with an exclamation of startled concern at sight of me. I saw anxious alarm in her dark eyes.

"There's been no harm done," I said, as I entered. "I've been swimming; and I'm hungry—that's all. The water is cold."

There were three men in the room, all on their feet. Jacques Jeanbard strode forward, laid a hand on my wet shoulder and advanced his lean face and sombre eyes to within a few inches of my own.

"What's happened, sir?" he whispered. "Attacked?"

I nodded, smiling. Jacques moved off to the windows and lowered the green cotton blinds. Jules Jeanbard and Stack Glashner stepped up and shook hands with me.

"It's a rough country," said Stack, grinning. "You look like somebody had throwed you into the drink. But I warned you."

"I like it rough," I replied, staring at him without an answering smile. "If rough's the game, whoever started it will find that my long suit is the rough stuff."

"Don't tell me," returned Stack. "I'm not startin' anything. I didn't throw you into the crick. I don't know why you went swimmin'."

I seated myself in the chair from which Stack had risen, close to the stove. The heat felt good, and I leaned forward to it. Rose took the coffee pot from the table, added fresh coffee and hot water and stood it on the stove. Jules put wood into the fire-box and sat down beside me. He looked anxious. Jacques insisted on pulling off my soaking coat.

"What happened, sir?" he asked.

I did not answer instantly, for I was wondering what had brought Stack Glashner so far from his home at Indian Ledge.

"Ye're amongst friends here," said Jules Jeanbard.

"Old Ruben Glashner wanted me to go fishing with him today, but I refused," I said. "I can't stand the poisonous old beast. He's a thief, a liar and a hypocrite; and if he had the self-respect of a worm he'd get out of that house. He sneaked into my room a few nights ago and stole my pistol. I took it back from him—pulled it out of his pocket—at the breakfast-table. When I refused to fish with him, he suggested that I should paddle down to the settlement and become acquainted."

"What did he want of yer gun?" interrupted Stack.

"I don't think he wanted it so much as he didn't want me to have it," I replied. "An unarmed man is a safer subject for murder than one with an automatic pistol in a handy pocket."

Then I told them exactly what had happened. I glanced at Rose. Her gaze was on my face, wide-eyed and tragic, and her cheeks were colorless. I smiled; and the pink bloomed again, the eyelids flickered and the intent gaze wavered. She took the coffee pot from the stove to the table, filled a cup and brought it to me.

"He can't shoot for nuts," said Stack. "He's got only one eye. He wouldn't of hit within twenty yards of the canoe. An' he ain't all there, anyhow. A darned sight less'n half-witted."

I sipped the coffee in silence.

"How many eyes d'ye use yerself when you shoot off a rifle?" asked Jules Jeanbard, turning to Stack. "I'm a pretty fair shot myself, an' one's all I ever use. An' as for him bein' less'n half-witted, all I got to say is that if he's insane enough to go round attemptin' murder, his folks had better git busy an' lock him up instead of tryin' to make excuses for him."

Stack Glashner's face reddened. "The old fool's nothin' to me," he said. "Same name, that's all. I have no dealin's with him."

"He's yer own pa's first cousin," returned Jules.

"Forgit it!" exclaimed the other. "I didn't pick 'im for a cousin for my old man, did I? Ye're always harpin' on that tune, Jules Jeanbard."

The senior Jeanbard let that go for what it was worth.

"If you are on speaking terms with the old fool," I said to Stack, "tell him from me that his goose was cooked when that shot was fired, whoever fired it. Tell him that he and his confederates and friends have just one chance of saving their dirty hides, and that's for him and whoever is working with him—it's a man who can read, tell him—to clear out of the Wicklow Creek country on the double."

"You've got me wrong," returned Stack. "I don't give a hoot what happens to that old skunk nor his friends. I mean well by you, as you know. Wasn't it me told you where you'd find a friend in the settlement—an old soldier—Jacques here?"

"You're right, Stack, and I beg your pardon," I said. "You are out of this, so keep out of it. My temper was ruffled slightly by that attempt on my life. Being picked for an easy mark always gets my goat."

After drinking three cups of coffee, a stiff glass of whisky, and eating bacon and eggs, hot biscuits, strawberry-jam and cream, my temper was greatly improved. Stack Glashner had cigarettes; and that helped.

It appeared that Stack was in the habit of making the trip from Indian Ledge to the Jeanbard farm once in every period of ten days, if not oftener. I gathered this from the conversation. He and Rose were quite evidently good friends. Jacques treated him with a slight suggestion of superiority. It was evident to me that the senior Jeanbard liked Stack but did not approve of his blood and surname. Stack was certainly a fine figure of a man; and his eyes were of the reckless, devil-may-care kind that prove extraordinarily attractive to most women. I watched, talking and smoking comfortably by the stove; and I decided that they had not yet had any serious effect on Rose Jeanbard.

Jules Jeanbard got out his fiddle and played for us. He was a fiddler of quality. He ruffled out his beard and whiskers, shut his eyes and played the most unusual things. One suggested thawing snow and wild geese flying over, northward bound. Another made me think of

red sunsets behind black spruces, and a little house and barn surrounded by great snowdrifts. I looked at his daughter; and she nodded to me just as if I had asked her a question. So I knew that the things were of his own composing, and that I had read them right. So I knew the fiddler for a real musician—a poet!

It was ten-thirty when I got reluctantly to my feet and said that I had to go home.

"I got to move, too," said Stack. "I'll take you home, like I did before—but behind a black mare this time, instead of in a canoe."

"I'll accept that offer on one condition—that you don't turn round and beat it as soon as you come in sight of the house," I replied.

"I'll step right in with you," he assured me, assuming a mock-heroic air. "I ain't

scared, nor overly particular. To hell with public opinion! I'll stop the night in the old house, if you say so."

There was a very good road passing just back of the barn. It ran up-stream as far as the old Deblore place, and all the way down to the village.

While Stack Glashner hitched the mare to the buggy, I said good night to the Jeanbards, shaking hands with each in turn. I took the girl's hand last; and I was startled to feel something in her palm. Her glance acknowledged it; and, realizing that the thing was a scrap of paper intended for me, I recovered my appearance of composure. I held her hand several seconds longer than convention authorizes; and as I crossed the threshold I slipped my own hand into a pocket. My first idea was to relight my pipe and examine the scrap of paper by the brief flame of the match; but I did not attempt it, for Stack called to me from the barnyard and Jules and Jacques were at my shoulders; and when I was snug beside Stack in the buggy I had not a chance.

There was starshine enough to see the road by, except in those places where the heavy growths of spruce and hemlock and fir crowded close in upon it from both sides. The black mare was long-gaited, sound and steady. She went forward like a dependable machine, taking the rough with the smooth, the dips with the rises. Every now and then a wheel went over a rock, a root or a log of an imperfect culvert, jouncing us sharply. Stack drove for a long time in silence. At last he spoke, suddenly.

"I'll bet ten dollars it wasn't old Ruben fired that shot," he said. "I ain't tryin' to defend him, mind you, but that wouldn't be his way. He'd know all about it, plan it, like as not, but when it comes to pullin' a trigger on a man—no, not for Ruben! He's short on nerve; and nerve's what's needed for the shootin' of a man in cold blood. Whoever's workin' with him, he's the man with the rifle. Any notion who he is, or why they're tryin' to pop you off?"

"Have you?" I asked.

"I reckon yer in somebody's way. Perhaps somebody's scared of you."

"You've heard of the treasure, I suppose?"

"Sure thing! That's an old story."

Then I told him of old Ruben's position in the house of Moosemeadows Park, of his constant spying about, of his expedition up one of the chimneys and of his talk to me at the orchard fence. I told him of the carrying off and return of my papers.

"He thinks you've got the dope, that's a sure thing," returned Stack reflectively. "But why would he want to bump you off before he gits hold of the right dope himself? What's the idea? Are they both fools—him an' his pardner?"

"He thinks he has it," I admitted. "When I saw that he took me for an easy mark, I couldn't resist the temptation of playing him for a sucker. It was easy, but the result is slightly more serious than I expected. I didn't expect them to start right in shooting."

"Someone wants to bump you off, that's a sure thing. But why would he? Must be scared of you."

"They think I know where the treasure is, and they think they have discovered my secret; and they are afraid that I may lift it before they do. Yes, and I believe that they are afraid of me."

"But there ain't any treasure. That's one of the oldest lies in the world."

"That's what I think," I replied; and then I told him all about the map and directions I had faked for old Ruben's labor and confusion. I told him of the removal of the faked documents at night from my Gladstone bag, of its alteration and return.

"That was smart," he said. "But if they think they got the bulge on you, what's the shootin' about? What are they scared of?'

To look at Stack Glashner, even by starshine, and to listen to him, was to trust him. And yet his appearance and air suggested irresponsibility. His eyes danced with a humor that was at once gay and derisive and good. I suspected that he was in love with Rose Jeanbard; but I liked him and firmly believed that he liked me.

"I'll tell you all that I know," I said; and I told him of my expedition into the hardhack, of that sudden sense of being observed, of the shaking alder and the brief loss of self-control during which I pulled off two shots. "And I'm a fair shot with that little gun," I concluded.

He was interested. "Hear of anybody with a bullet in him?" he asked.

"The Russian peddler," I replied. "Miss Jeanbard told me that he came to her to have a bullet wound in his left hand dressed."

"When was that?" he asked.

I told him.

"I saw him today—that old peddler," he said. "He was at the Jeanbard place

when I got there, about five o'clock. Had colored goggles on, and his left hand bandaged. He went away before supper, before the men came home."

"Was he toting a rifle?" I asked.

"He didn't have it with him at the house," answered Stack. And after a reflective silence, he added, "You better keep yer eye skinned. Yer up agin' something desperate, if you ask me."

THE highroad ended in the barnyard of Moosemeadows Park. We stabled and fed the black mare in the dark. The kitchen windows showed rays of light past the edges of the lowered blinds; and within we found Amy Bear dozing in a rocking-chair and the kettle steaming on the stove. I heard a movement behind us as we crossed the threshold, turned and saw Lion at our heels. He pushed his muzzle into my hand, sniffed Stack politely, then turned and stalked out again. I closed the door, knowing that the dog knew his own business best; and at the moment Amy sat up suddenly and opened her eyes. She looked relieved at sight of me, got quickly but heavily to her feet and crossed to the big dresser where the kitchen dishes were kept. She brought plates, bread and a teapot to the table. I asked her why she had sat up so late.

"For you," she said. "An' kep' the kittle b'ilin'."

"That was very kind of you, but it won't do," I said. "You must let me come and go without upsetting the routine."

"Tom tole me to do it, but I would anyhow," she replied, proceeding with her preparations for a hearty cold supper with hot tea.

I motioned Stack to a chair, then stooped over the table to the lamp, fished the scrap of paper from my pocket and read it furtively in the palm of my hand:

You must go away. You are not safe here. I cannot tell you more, for I have been made to swear not to tell what I know. Your life is in danger. We three and Stack are your friends. They do not know what I know. Say nothing to anyone, but go away. And burn this.

IX

I SHUT my hand on the paper, crumpling it, and turned from the table to the stove. The draught was open, glowing red; and into it I let fall the little ball of paper.

"Where are the other dogs?" I asked. "I saw Lion at the door."

"Duster an' Spud go with Tom an' Sol to hunt for you, six o'clock maybe. Lion stop to watch out," answered Amy.

"To hunt for me?" I exclaimed. "What damn nonsense! What do they think I am? I am as safe in a canoe as either Tom Deblore or Sol Bear."

"But you didn't bring yer canoe home with you this time," remarked Stack, grinning. He turned to Amy. "Is old Ruben Glashner out, too, huntin' for Swayton?" he asked.

"The ol' devil's out, but I don't know what he hunt for," replied the squaw. "But I pray to Holy Mary he find his grave, that snake!"

Stack and I were not hungry, but we ate and drank. Amy climbed the narrow stairs to her bedroom.

"Tell you what we'll do," said Stack, pushing the gingerbread away from him and producing a package of cigarettes. "Let's make a night of it. Everyone's doin' it, so we might as well."

"How?" I asked. "Eat all night, or what?"

"Take a cruise 'round. I'll bet Ruben ain't huntin' for you down along the crick. Let's take a snoop over North Moosemedder way. Fetch along yer gun, and an' electric torch if you have one."

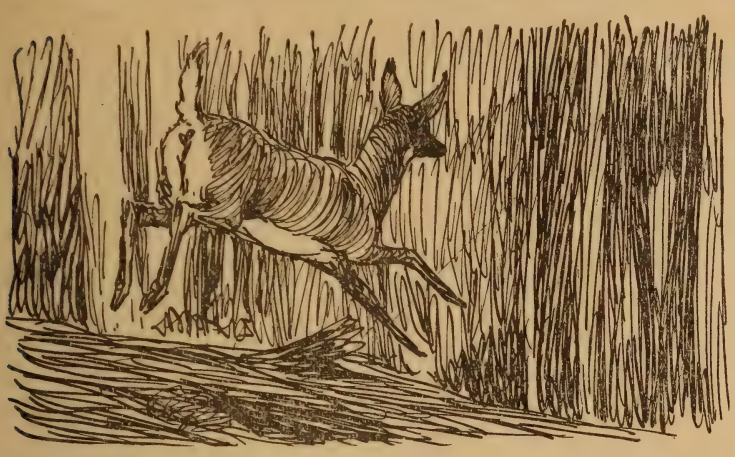
We went, leaving the lamp burning on the kitchen table and a note for Tom Deblore beside it saying that I was all right and would be back before sunrise. Lion joined us just outside, accompanied us for a few hundred yards of our way, then turned back to his task of patrolling the house. We walked swiftly and straight, and what little talk we had was done in whispers. My thoughts ran on the message from Rose Jeanbard, over and over it, demanding of every word of it an explanation of its note of authority and its secretive manner.

We stumbled often in the pitch dark of the old woodroad. We sent a deer, that had bedded for the night close to the track, crashing away through the underbrush. A horned owl startled us several times with its weird cries.

"They'd post a sentry, I reckon," whispered Stack. "But that depends on their number. If there's only the two of 'em —old Ruben an' the devil who sniped at you—they'd both be workin', I guess. They'll show a light now an' then, I wouldn't wonder, to read their map an'

compass by. But we can't be too careful. Keep yer gun in a handy pocket."

We must have been within three hundred yards of the edge of the open waste of hardhack, moving slowly in file along



a mere ghost of a track, when Stack, who was behind me, laid a detaining hand on my shoulder.

"Hist," he breathed in my ear. "Someone's behind us, comin'. Hark!"

I halted and listened, turning my head and slipping my right hand into the right-hand pocket of my coat. For a few seconds I heard nothing but the thumping of my own heart and Stack's excited breathing. Then I caught it—the approaching swish of underbrush sprung by a passing body and the knock of a boot on a root or a stone.

"It may be Deblore or Sol Bear, still hunting for me," I whispered.

"An' maybe not," Stack replied. "We'll lay for 'im an' find out."

We moved backward into the brush, elbow to elbow, and crouched. Stack asked me for my flashlight, and I passed it to him. The sounds of the passage along the brush-flooded track drew nearer swiftly. They were not loud, and the footfalls were light. They came abreast of us, within three yards of us. We arose, straightening our cramped knees.

"Halt!" exclaimed Stack in a cracked voice, stepping forward at the same moment and snapping on the light. As the thin ray leaped ahead, he stumbled, dropped the torch, pitched forward on hands and knees and swore. I tried to jump clear of him, but somehow fouled an up-flung arm and went down with a crash. We scrambled to our feet and collided, both cursing impotently in agitated whispers.

"The torch!" I demanded. "The torch!"

"Where the hell's it got to?" cried Stack, clawing about our feet.

"He's passed us!" I exclaimed, and dashed furiously and blindly forward. My third jump was checked in mid-air; and down I went in the wreck of the punky, rotten, woodpecker-riddled, worm-eaten butt of a long-since-deceased birch. It fell about me and upon me in lumps of dead wood and shreds of rotten bark, and crumbled before me and beneath me in punk and powder. I was half choked before I could scramble to my feet. I brushed the dust and muck of decay from my face and eyes.

"That was damn fine work!" I exclaimed. "That takes the prize—as the worst botch of an easy job I ever saw, by the Lord!"

"Pretty bad," admitted Stack. "I kinder got my legs all balled up at the jump-off. But here's the flash. What we best do now?"

My blood was up with my temper.

"We'll go on," I said. "I shall, at least. You can do as you please."

"I'm with you," he replied, after a moment's pause. "Push ahead, but watch yer step an' keep yer eyes skinned."

We continued our advance with the utmost caution. I parted the brush before me; and Stack, close on my heels, eased it back into place behind us without so much as a swish. I was as careful with my feet, feeling for a safe and noiseless foothold at every step. We came out on the edge of the waste of hardhack with no more sound than shadows. We were of a world of shadows. The starshine was vaguer and dimmer than it had been. It merged everything, wood and waste and sky, in nothingness. We stared outward, and to right and left, and saw nothing. We gave ear, and heard nothing. We must have stood thus, motionless and silent, for fully five minutes, before anything happened. Then Stack took hold of my arm and contracted his fingers slowly. I felt his breath against my ear.

"Out there to yer right," he whispered. "About half-right."

I looked and seemed to catch sight of a glimmer of light. But it was gone quick as the turn of the eye, and I was not sure.

It came again, a blink of yellow out in the gloom, and vanished again.

"D'ye git it?"

"Yes."

We continued to stand and stare, Stack's hand still on my arm.

"There! A lantern."

The light out on the waste of hardhack had again reappeared, but this time as something more than a glimmering glimpse. It remained steady for ten or fifteen seconds, and was obviously the flame of a lantern. It was lurid and small in the misty gloom—a red speck within a circumscribed ring of murky yellow.

"How far d'ye make it?" whispered Stack.

"From here? Hard to say in this light," I whispered back. "There's a mist out there. No landmarks. Five hundred—or more."

At that moment it disappeared, sank from sight.

"They're diggin'," whispered Stack. "You got 'em fooled for fair! Now they got the lantern down in the hole, lookin' for somethin'. I'll bet a dollar it's wet diggin'."

"I wrote of hidden marks on the fake map," I replied.

Stack sniggered.

"I'd like to know where the man who passed us has got to," I said.

Just then the lantern reappeared and again stood steady. I suggested that we advance upon it and jump the diggers. But Stack was against it. He refused, point-blank.

"What good would it do you to grab old Ruben?" he asked. "Or even his partner? It wouldn't prove he was the man who sniped at you on the crick. It's him you want, an' caught with the goods on him. He's standin' guard, like enough, while t'other digs; an' somebody'd git punctured. Wait an' see, that's our game,"

"You were keen enough to start," I replied. "It was your idea."

"That's right," he admitted. "An' ain't we here gittin' a line on them?"

I was about to retort that we were not learning anything that I had not already suspected, when the whanging report of a high-power rifle somewhere on our right stilled the first word on my lips and startled the thought from my mind. My gaze was on the lantern-flame. It vanished.

"Jumpin' Joshiphat!" whispered Stack incredulously; and then, with horror as well as incredulity in his tone, "Good God!" he added.

I was startled and astonished, too, but I did not see anything to be so violently moved about as all that. They were shooting among themselves evidently—which was astounding, of course, but nothing to be horror-stricken over. But it was puzzling. Was there a gang of treasure-seekers; and had they fallen out among themselves? Had old Ruben Glashner tried to double-cross someone? Had the shot been fired by the man who had escaped us on the path? And who had that been? My would-be murderer? Or might it be that Deblore and Sol Bear had heard of the attempt on my life in some way and, grown desperate, had gone out gunning for Ruben?

"What do you make of that?" I asked. "Who's shooting at whom?"

"Lord knows! I'll go see. It was a signal, that shot."

"A signal? I don't believe it. I saw the light jump before it sank. Someone's gunning for the treasure-hunters."

"It was a signal. Why wouldn't the light jump, when it was snatched like that? The man who got away from us fired to warn 'em. I'll snoop over an' try to see who it was. You stop here."

"Why should I stop here?"

"To see who comes up off the medder. There's two of 'em, I reckon; an' the one on our right who fired the signal."

"Are you armed?"

"No, but that don't matter. I won't take a chance of drawin' his fire. All I want's a look-see."

"Rot! You can't see in the dark. It won't do any good to go and *listen* to him in the dark."

"I might take yer flash."

"So that he can see to shoot you. Bright idea, Stack. What we had better do is stick right here, together, and wait for the diggers to come along. If there are two of them, we'll learn something."

Stack said nothing to that. I considered his opinion of the rifle shot—that it had been a friendly warning and not a hostile act—and still could not see it. He had sounded very cocksure; but I was not convinced. I felt that a friendly warning might have been conveyed in some less noisy and violent way. Why not a whistle, for instance?

"I bet you five dollars that was an aimed shot, not a signal," I said. "I bet

another five that the lantern was smashed."

Stack did not answer. I turned my head. I put out a hand. I felt on all sides, with both arms extended. I shifted my ground cautiously, a yard this way, a yard that. "Stack!" I whispered. "Stack Glashner! What the devil?"

But Stack did not answer. He was not present. He had slipped away. I was indignant, and started to the right after him. I went only six or eight steps, however, then returned to my former position, for I was more puzzled than angered by Stack's queer behavior. I waited, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. After waiting twenty-five minutes, I decided to return to the house. Then I heard Stack's voice, in a guarded whisper, from close at hand.

"Come on, cap, let's beat it. You lead the way."

"But what about that shot?" I asked.

"A washout! You couldn't find an elephant in these woods in the dark. No good of us waitin' here any longer for the diggers, neither. They've lit out by some other way, I guess."

So I turned and felt for and found the ghost of the path.

"Make it lively," urged Stack.

I was willing. I felt that I had been on a fool's errand and was glad to be on my homeward way. Also, I was anxious about Tom Deblore and Sol Bear. I pushed ahead swiftly, and Stack followed. We let the bushes and saplings swish behind us. We made good time, breasting thus boldly through the young growth. Upon reaching the wider track, my companion drew abreast of me, and we made even better speed.

"Well, we're not much wiser than we were," I said.

"Not much," admitted Stack. "The thing to do's spy on old Ruben, day an' night—track him around. Then you'd find out who it was sniped at you on the crick."

"Daytime spying for me," I returned. "This crawling about in the dark hasn't got us anywhere."

Stack accepted that in silence. Fifteen minutes or so later, I spoke again.

"The chances are that the person who tried to murder me believes himself to have been successful," I said. "In that case, all concerned believe it. I showed my head only once, and not for long, and I was a good way down-stream by then. My idea is that it might be a wise thing to let them continue in that belief. I've fooled Ruben and his partner once. This should be easy. We'll bag those damn murderers by craft instead of by force. It'll be safer, too."

Stack liked the idea. I elaborated my plan to him.

When we reached the barns, he said that he would not wait until daylight, as it was important to warn the Jeanbards, without loss of time, to say nothing of my accident nor of having seen me since my first visit. I made no effort to detain him, but went on to the house. The light was gone from the kitchen; but within ten yards of the door I was greeted silently by all three dogs. This informed me, as surely as if I had heard it from them in words, that Tom and Sol were home but that old Ruben had not yet returned. If Ruben had been in the house, so would Lion have been there.

The door had not been fastened. I entered the kitchen, leaving the dogs outside. I struck a match, to make sure that Deblore had found my note. He had evidently read it, for it lay crumpled on the hearth of the stove. I set the match to it, then groped my way up the back stairs in the dark to my host's room.

"Who's that?" he asked, as I opened the door.

"It's Giddy," I said, closing the door behind me. I groped my way to the bed, sat down on the edge of it and told him, in the fewest possible words, of the attempt on my life and the blind expedition from which Stack Glashner and I had just now returned.

"I'm going to hide for a while—pretend I'm dead," I concluded.

Tom put his hand in the dark and laid it on my knee. It was trembling. His voice trembled, too, when he spoke.

"It's the only thing for you to do, lad," he said. "We'll hide you away in the attic. I'll warn Sol and Amy. Pass me my pants, will you—from the chair on your left—and my slippers from under it. Don't strike a match."

"I don't believe it was old Ruben who shot at me," I said, as he dressed.

"That crawling slug!" he retorted. "Of course it wasn't. Hasn't the nerve to do anything but sneak and lie and steal. I wish to heaven I could think it was him! No chance! He's the jackal."

"Do you know of any one of the settlers who'd shoot at me in cold blood, like that?" I asked.

He was on his feet by this time, leading me toward the door.

"Those lumps? Not one of them! Mob

murder, community murder, is the most they'd ever work up courage to attempt. I wish to God I could think otherwise! No. It's someone, something, that would just as soon kill a man as crack a nut."

His voice shook, as if he had been running or wrestling. His hand trembled in mine. He was frightened, terrified, if ever a man was. As he led me along through the dark, his quaking touch communicated much of his terror to me. I felt more fear now than I had upon first realizing the dreadful significance of the splinter standing up from the gunnel of the canoe. And I felt pity, too. Knowing that Tom Deblore was not a coward, I pitied him for his fear. My emotions were as mixed and confused as my thoughts. We entered the main building, on the second floor. The smells of dust and mustiness were strong. We ascended a steep, narrow staircase; and at the top of it the smell of dust and dry-rot was even stronger than below. Still Tom led me by a hand. We went forward in darkness; and I felt the dust under my feet like a carpet.

"Here we are," he whispered, releasing my hand. "Here's the ladder. Wait till I unfasten the hatch."

I heard him climbing slowly. I put out a hand and felt the sturdy, rough-hewn ladder going straight up. From close above my head I heard the rasping complaint of a key in a rusty lock. I heard the old man's quick breathing, then a grunt, then a soft thud.

"Come on up, Giddy," he whispered.

I went up the ladder, seeing nothing. I felt the top of the ladder and a floor thick with dust. As I thrust head and shoulders through the hatchway, the breath of dust and cobwebs and dry-rot was so stifling that I held my breath. I felt his hand on my shoulder, then under my arm.

"You've got the whole length of the house here," he whispered. "Mind your head—how you stand up! The old house will hide you, lad, from the devil himself."

I saw a small, glimmering square of gray light far in front.

"There are two little windows, one in each end," continued the old man. "It's the only safe place for you, lad. We'll get water and food and bedding up to you at the first chance."

I was close under the ridge-pole of the old house, in the very peak of the old roof. I felt as I had not felt since I was a very small boy. I grabbed at Tom, who was about to descend the ladder, and caught him by a muscular shoulder.

"Don't lock that trap-door!" I exclaimed.

"Don't lock it?" he queried. After a pause, "What else can I do, for your safety?" he continued. He paused again. "I understand how you feel, lad. I'll shut it after me, but I won't lock it. I'll think of some other way of guarding your hiding-place."

He went down then, and I reluctantly lowered the trap-door into place after him. I felt tired and shaken. Rose Jeanbard's frightened warning and Deblore's terror had unnerved me; and this place of dust and gloom high up under the rotting roof-tree of the old house of pride and iniquity choked my courage. I made my way cautiously to the nearer of the two windows and saw that dawn was flooding the wilderness with silver. I drew a rusty bolt and opened the window inward on rusty hinges. I closed it in a little while and lay down on the dusty floor and sank into a deep sleep.

I awoke and sat up suddenly. The sun was high, disclosing a funereal vista of black and gray curtains and festoons of spider-webs draped from the ancient, hidden rafters. But my glance slanted instantly to the trap-door, which was lifting slowly. I got quickly to my feet and approached it swiftly and noiselessly, prepared for desperate measures. But it was Tom Deblore, laden with blankets, a basket of food and books and a pail of water. I helped him through the hole and relieved him of basket and pail. He dropped the blankets to the floor and sat down on them. His eyes were darker than usual. as if with shadows of anxiety or fear.

"It's worked so far," he said. "Ruben came in soon after I left you. He was a sight at breakfast—hadn't got all the mud off his clothes. Asked about you; and I told him we hadn't seen nor heard anything of you yet, but would set out hunting for you again if you didn't turn up in a couple of hours. The old hyena said that you'd likely gone all the way down to the village for a taste of wild life. I had to lock my hands between my knees to keep them away from his throat."

I drank from the full pail of cold spring water, then dipped head and arms into what remained and indulged in a splashing wash. Drying my face on a corner of a blanket, I asked if old Ruben had gone out again. Tom said yes, and that Lion, who had shadowed him off, had come back.

"I suppose the old devil thinks everything is working his way now," I said.

"He's hoping that you are dead, that's certain—but he doesn't seem to be entirely free from anxiety," returned Tom. "That rifle shot you spoke of. That's worrying him, I think. It puzzles me, too."

"But was that a shot or a signal? Stack maintained that it was a signal, a warning. It looked to me like a shot. It looked to me as if the lantern either received a direct hit or was overturned."

"Warning be damned! There's no third party to that outfit. That was an aimed shot, fired to kill; and I wish to heaven it had killed—but I guess it didn't, or Ruben would have stopped at home today. He hasn't the nerve to carry on single-handed."

I had been eating briskly while we talked, and paying more attention to the food than to my companion's face; but now I took a good look at him and concentrated all my faculties on him. I realized that he knew, or believed that he knew, more than I did about this affair of old Ruben Glashner and his murderous confederate.

"Was it you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Sol and I were hunting up and down the creek," he replied. "We were not anywhere near the moosemeadows. You saw that peddler you spoke of?"

"Only at a distance. Do you know him?"

"I've never seen him."

"But you suspect him."

"Why hasn't he been here to sell his goods, if he's what he pretends to be? He terrified the Jeanbard girl, you say, and was wounded in the hand? And she sensed something false and objectionable about him, so you told me. What is one to do but believe the worst?"

"But what is there to fear, so long as I keep hidden? Why not have the peddler arrested, on suspicion?"

"On suspicion of what?"

"Of the attempt on my life, of course!"

His glance avoided mine. "Yes, yes, of course," he returned. "But you don't understand, Giddy. To call in the Law—God only knows what that might lead to! You must keep hidden, play dead, that is the only thing to do, and pray for the best. Something may happen—a lucky accident."

"You are in a blue funk," I accused him. "So you were last night. It was me they shot at, not you, but I have no intention of letting myself go all to pieces—nor of playing dead indefinitely."

"You don't understand!" he cried. He swung around, and lowered his legs through the hatch. He was trembling. "Have patience. Be careful, for God's sake!" He started down the ladder, fumbling with hands and feet so that he came within an ace of missing his hold. From the floor below he added, without looking up, "Don't think me mad, for I know what I'm talking about."

I lowered the trap-door into place. I paced noiselessly on the deep dust from window to window, from end to end of the long garret. I was puzzled and worried by the change in Tom Deblore. I had not thought him a coward. And I was puzzled and worried by the message I had received from Rose Jeanbard. And the garret depressed me, with its dust and decay and horrid draperies. I let some air in, now from one little window and again from the other, setting the festoons of filthy webs swaying dismally. I saw fat gray spiders with mottled backs running and climbing. I gazed from one window for hours at a time, then from the other, at and over the clearings and shaggy forests, envying the crows with the wind in their square-cut pinions, and the hawk turning smoothly high up in the blue, and the hammering woodpecker down in the old orchard, and even the brown hare running for cover. I almost regretted this crafty trick of mine of pretending to be dead. It almost seemed to me now that I should be better off outdoors being sniped at from ambush by old Ruben Glashner's conscienceless confederate. Almost.

The day wore along, and no news came to me from the world below. Was Rose Jeanbard in danger, I wondered. And why had old Tom Deblore gone to pieces all of a sudden? The dust and spiders and smell of rot began to work on my fan-

cies, recalling ghost stories and tales by Poe. The proximity of the foul roof began to weary my neck and shoulders like an actual contact.

The sun was red on the western horizon when I heard a sound at the ladder. I advanced to within practical distance of the trap-door, and my fingers cuddled to the grip of the little gun in my pocket. But it was only Sol Bear. He brought water, food and a hot pot of coffee. He told me that Ruben had returned to the house at noon, looking weary and wild, had slept like a log until three and then gone out again. Beyond this, he had nothing to tell me; that is to say, he told me nothing—which amounted to the same thing. He was like a block of wood when I asked him why Tom had fallen into such a sudden, deadly funk. He didn't stay long.

It was eleven o'clock when I decided that the risk of being shot was the lesser of two evils by which I was menaced. The other was the danger of losing my nerve. The web-draped tunnel under the rooftree of the ancient house of Deblore was getting me. For hours I had been trying to fall asleep, without a blink of success. I had been listening for I knew not what, and had half-heard many extraordinary, vague things from below and above. There were rats in the old walls, of course; and heaven only knows what in the great chimneys. And I had been looking, staring wide-eyed toward every sound and suggestion of sound; and where my eyes had failed, my imagination had succeeded. It was eleven o'clock when I raised the trap-door and set my feet cautiously on the ladder. I lowered the trap after me as I descended and set it noiselessly in place. And now I was at the foot of the short ladder, in the vast and empty attic. I could not obtain a glimpse of any window from here, so I was in utter darkness. I wondered, with a chilly shock, if Tom had locked the door at the head of the attic stairs. Then I heard something, a breathing, from close at hand. My nerves jumped and my muscles froze. Then sounded a low whine. My muscles relaxed, my nerves steadied and my lungs and heart resumed the normal performance of their natural functions.

"Good dog," I whispered; and a moist nose was thrust into my hand.

It was Lion; and I now knew Deblore's method of safeguarding my retreat without locking me in. I felt a glow of gratitude toward the old man as well as the dog. For several minutes I fumbled about in the dark, groping from room to room, feeling vainly for the head of the stairs.

Presently I was rejoined by Lion. He walked beside me purposefully, with a shoulder against my thigh, and thus guided me to the way down. I turned in the direction of the wing containing the kitchen and storerooms below and the inhabited bedrooms above. The big dog did not follow me immediately, but was at my heels by the time I had found the door connecting the main building with the wing. I let him through with me, for that was evidently his wish. I already entertained a very high opinion of his intelligence. I paused at Deblore's door, which was shut, for long enough for my ears to assure me that he was there and sleeping soundly; and at the Bears' door, where I also heard indications of slumber; but at old Ruben Glashner's door I failed to hear anything. I had removed my boots before entering the wing. I found the top of the narrow stairs leading down to the kitchen without so much sound as the creak of a board. Lion stuck close to me. The kitchen-stairs were encased from top to bottom by a plastered wall on one hand and a thin screen of tongued-and-grooved pine on the other. Looking down, I beheld a faint shine of lamplight at the foot of the staircase.

I began the descent slowly, setting my feet close to the plastered wall. Lion followed me close. When halfway down I found what I was hoping for—a spot of light in the pine on my right. I leaned over and set an eye to the knothole thus disclosed. The big table between the stove and the outer door was in full view. A lantern stood on the table, with the wick turned low; and beside the table, with his back to me, stood old Ruben Glashner, hatted and fully dressed. There was no mistaking his stoop and shape. He turned and glanced around, moving aside a pace; and I saw on the table, between him and the lantern, a small covered basket. He had the air of one listening. He faced about again after a few seconds and extinguished the lantern. I heard the outer door open and close.

The big dog and I completed the descent of the stairs and stole across the kitchen. I felt my way to a window beside the door, drew aside the cotton blind and peered out

into the night, which was inadequately lit by misty stars. I could see nothing of Ruben and very little of anything else. Lion went out with me and, once outside, took the lead. In the barnyard we were joined by the other dogs, Duster and Spud. They frisked about excitedly but refrained from barking. They went ahead with Lion until the road was crossed, then turned back toward the farmstead. I had not ordered them back. I felt that Lion must have done so. Lion continued to lead on at a brisk walk, without hesitation, and I kept touch with him with a hand on his shoulder. Thus we traveled the old logging-road in utter darkness. We had gone two miles or more when Lion checked suddenly and backed against me. I halted, though I had neither seen nor heard anything. Then a match flared about fifty yards in front, close to the ground. The light dwindled, then increased; and I knew that old Ruben had lit the lantern. It lifted and moved from side to side, as if he were searching for something. The glass of the lantern was smoky and its light was dim and circumscribed. It moved back, toward us, along the edge of the mossy road; and we shrank back into the brush. It continued its hesitant and retrograde movement until it was within twenty paces of us; and I crouched low and lower. It paused there, then left the logging-road and flickered off into the woods. The dog and I immediately got into motion again.

It was difficult to keep the lantern in sight and at the same time avoid a disclosure of our pursuit. The underbrush was thick in places, the ground was rough everywhere. The dog went quietly enough, but I was constantly in danger of crashing into branches that were ready to snap the alarm and of setting a foot into some tangle or rotting blowdown. The light, carried low, was frequently hidden from me for seconds at a time by intervening screens. Once I caught my toe under an exposed root and fell full length, but fortunately in an open and mossy spot. The lantern increased its lead and finally disappeared entirely from my broken and restricted field of vision. But the big dog put his nose to the ground and continued to go forward; and I left it to him, keeping a hand on his back for my guidance. We presently saw light again. This was stationary, and stronger than that of old Ruben's lantern. It was the wavering glow of a small fire. We approached it slowly and with the utmost caution.

The fire burned before a little lean-to shelter of boughs. Lying flat, with Lion crouched beside me, I looked out from the underbrush at the fire and across it into the shelter. The lantern was within, still lit; and by its obscure shine I saw old Ruben Glashner on his knees and stooped above a figure on the ground. We were near enough for me to catch intermittent murmurs of two voices above the low breathing and occasional snapping of the fire. For a time, a few minutes, I failed to distinguish any word; and then the voice that was not Ruben's spoke louder, and I got a whole phrase.

"I'll live to rip his guts out yet," he said.

A chill ran from the base of my scalp down along my spine. The words were upsetting in themselves, under the circumstances, but the voice and the tone of it were worse. If ever a man meant what he said, that man in the lean-to did. The voice was weak, shaken with pain, but there was no note of despair in it and nothing of hysterics. It was cool and decisive and terrible. It said murder and sounded murder. I had never before heard so hateful and daunting a voice.

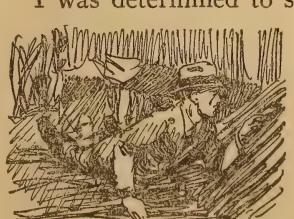
"I know who did it," he added. "He'll wish he'd never been born. Two of them will die for it. The girl first, for blabbing."

Then old Ruben talked, but all I could hear of what he said was a whining murmur.

"You poor damned white-livered fool!" cried the other. "Do you still think that I am afraid to kill? Haven't I done it often enough to convince you that it's no more to me than pullin' a cork?"

Soon after this, old Ruben lay down. The other continued to mutter and babble for a time, as if in delirium; but at last even he was silent. The fire settled low, lower, with an occasional snap and sparkle, until it was but a mound of red and yellow embers over which a film of gray began to creep. The lantern inside the shelter was still alight. Old Ruben had hooked it to one of the uprights of the flimsy frame before he lay down.

I was determined to see the face of the man who had tried to take my life and, if possible, to ascertain the nature and degree of his wound. So I backed away, on all-fours, and set out on a flanking crawl, accompanied by the big dog. The dog



seemed to know exactly what I was about, and to approve of it. I flanked the fallen fire and the shelter and closed in on the rear of the shelter. It was slow work. But I reached my objective without accident and laid a hand on the fir-thatched slope of the humble roof. I steadied myself on my knees, schooled my breathing, and got to work with both hands at a spot near where I judged the head of my enemy to be. I contrived a practical peephole without so much sound as that of the flutter of a moth's wing. I set an eye to it. The terrible fellow's head was within a yard and a half of me; and it was a terrible head. His eyes were wide open, staring upward, black as coal and bright as fire, alive but unseeing. Even in suffering and delirium, they were hateful and terrifying. One of his heavy eyebrows was puckered by a pale scar which slanted upward across his forehead. His nose was large and hooked. His wide, crooked mouth hung open, as if he were gasping for breath. His untidy beard was gray. It grew high on his high cheekbones. He was wrapped in blankets to the armpits, with both arms left exposed. One hand was in a soiled bandage. The other hand, long-fingered and thin as a bird's claw, moved back and forth ceaselessly across his breast. I could not see anything of the wound that had laid him there, but knew that it must be below the line of his armpits, somewhere under the blankets—and a desperate one.

A daunting conviction came to me. I suddenly understood Tom Deblore's terror and realized the significance of Rose Jeanbard's warning. The girl must have learned the truth by chance—the truth that I knew now—that the peddler, Ruben Glashner's confederate, the man who had tried to murder me in cold blood, *was Henry Deblore.* I wondered that I had not guessed it before. But to see that face was to know it—the face of a beast of prey who killed for the killing's sake. And the shot at the lantern out on the hardhack, that, too, seemed half explained. Somebody besides Tom and the girl knew or suspected the truth; and Henry Deblore was in the country of his enemies, home again where he was hated and feared.

I backed from the peephole in the thatch of brush, turned and crawled away. I was rejoined by Lion, who had been waiting a few yards off. He seemed to know what I wanted, sniffed around and took up our unmarked trail in from the logging-road. By the time we reached the old road a slow drizzle was seeping down through the overhanging boughs from a starless sky. I paused at the edge of the track for long enough to make a few marks in the moss, then set out for the house at a fast walk.

It was close upon three o'clock when we reached the old house of Moosemeadows Park; and the soft rain was still dredging down from a blind and graying sky; and the kitchen door was still on the latch. I went directly up to Tom Deblore's room, in haste, without attempting to lighten my feet or avoid contacts with walls and furniture.

X

"WHO'S there! Name yourself!" cried Tom, his voice at once threatening an apprehensive.

It checked me on the threshold. I knew, by its desperate note and hysterical shake, that the old man had a hand on an offensive or defensive weapon of some sort and was keyed up to the pitch required for its most effective use.

"It's Giddy," I said; and then I heard the creak of a board behind me, and turned my head. "That you, Sol?" I asked.

"Sure," replied the voice of the big Maliseet. "Hear somethin' in a hurry, so jump quick. You all by yerself? A'-right."

"Yes, I'm alone," I answered. "You'd better hop back to bed, Sol."

By this time, Tom had struck a match and set it to the wick of his candle. He was sitting bolt upright. I stepped across the matted floor, drew up a chair to the side of the bed and sat down, facing him. The flame of the candle grew and burned clear. I saw two pistols of ancient pattern lying on the little night-table beside the candlestick; and, on the patchwork quilt of the bed, a belt-ax; and from beneath the holster protruded the unmistakable butt of a shotgun. I was glad that I had checked at the threshold and given my name.

"You've been out!" exclaimed Tom. "What has happened? Where's Ruben? Where's the dog?"

"Ruben is in the woods, and Lion is outside with the other dogs," I said. "He'll come in when old Glashner comes back, never fear! Yes, I've been out—rather! —and now I know who shot at me. I was a fool not to guess it at first."

"Who?" he whispered, staring.

"I spotted old Ruben down in the kitchen, with a lantern and a basket," I replied. "Lion and I went out after him, and trailed him. We followed him about two miles along the old woodroad, and then into the woods on the left about half a mile, or more, to an encampment. There was a fire, and there was a lean-to of brush and poles with a man in it. He said he would live to rip the guts out of the fellow who'd shot him. That was the shot Stack and I heard, down by the meadow. He talked a good deal about killing people —people already killed and yet to be killed. He asked old Ruben if he hadn't already bumped off a sufficient number to prove that murder was no more to him than pulling a cork. Ruben lay down, and the fire fell low, and I crawled around to the back of the camp. I took a look at the murderer through a hole in the roof. I knew by his bandaged hand that he was the peddler—and by his face who he really is. Then I knew that you had guessed it first, and I understood why you had lost your nerve. It's the face of a devil. Now I believe everything bad I've ever heard of him; and I don't blame the people for hating the very name of Deblore."

Tom sighed, groaned, nodded his head.

"But what has brought him back?" I continued. "He is looking for that treasure—and blood. Then there must be something in those old rumors, to bring him back after all these years."

"God knows! Is he seriously wounded, d'ye think?"

"I think he has got what's his due at last. He was delirious. He looked that way, though I couldn't see the wound. Below his shoulders somewhere. I guess he has done his last murder; and I just missed being it."

"He is my brother, Giddy. We were never friends, of course, and he robbed me of my inheritance for years. He was bad, 'tis true, but to call in the authorities would be to publish his whole past, and a hundred suspicions, to the world. His past—and mine. I am content to live quietly here. And the name, Giddy. It used to be a proud name— If he is wounded to the death, that will be best. To have him die quietly there in the woods, tended by Ruben Glashner. Ruben was his tool in the old days. If so, that was a blessed shot, whoever fired it. You believe him to be seriously wounded? You think that he is unable to stand?"

"He didn't raise his shoulders once while I was there. But I know that he has survived serious wounds before this. That scar, for instance. When did he get that?"

"Scar?" queried the old man. "I don't remember anything of the kind about Henry, no visible scar. But it is years since I last saw him, more than ten years. I have hoped that he was dead. What manner of scar?"

"A sabre may have done it," I replied. "A devil of a hack, whatever did it. From the right eyebrow up and across to somewhere in front of the left ear. I've seen plenty of bad scars, and bad wounds——"

I stopped, gazing at Tom Deblore. Tom stared at me, but I knew that he was seeing something else. His lower jaw was sagged. His nose and forehead and cheekbones were bloodless. I glanced over my shoulder, behind me, but there was nothing terrible to be seen there—nothing but my own shadow on the wall. I brought back my glance to the old man's face. He brought up his jaw and moved his lips, but all I could hear was a mumble.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaning forward from my chair. "Are you ill? You need something, a drink."

"His eyes?" he whispered, almost breathless with the stress of his emotion. "Blue, like mine?"

"They didn't appear so to me," I answered. "They were black—by lantern-light, at least. Black and deep sunk, but large. He was delirious. He was dark —what I could see of his skin. Swarthy."

The old man fell back on his pillow, with a hand pressed to his heart. He whispered something I did not catch, but I had sense enough to realize what he needed most at the moment and to act quick. I found it in the drawer of his washstand—a bottle half-full of brandy. I poured a stiff shot into him; after which he gasped several times, and then sat up again.

"If that is true, then Heaven help me!" he moaned.

"What?" I asked.

He did not answer my question. Instead, he helped himself to another swig from the bottle. Feeling somewhat done-in myself, I followed his example.

"I'll think of something, by morning," he whispered. "You'd better turn in for a few hours. I'll try to think of something. You think there's nothing to fear from him tonight—that he's in no condition to get about for a few hours?"

"Get about! Not inside a month, even

if he had a doctor—if ever. He's done for, in my opinion."

"God grant it! Good night."

Tom Deblore's behavior, his obvious increase of terror, had wrought such confusion in my mind that when I left him I failed to recall the fact that I was in hiding and pretending to be dead. I did not give the spider-haunted tunnel in the pitch of the roof a thought, but went directly to the large chamber that had first been put at my disposal, shook and kicked off the most easily detached articles of apparel and tumbled into bed.

It was ten o'clock when I awoke. The sky was gray, and a thin rain drifted on a misty draught from the east. I found Deblore and Sol and Amy in the kitchen, and the breakfast dishes still on the table. This surprised me, for Tom had once told me that the weather was never bad enough to keep Sol indoors from some job in field or wood or barn. And now the energetic Indian sat beside the stove with a pipe in his mouth, his hands idle in his lap and an expression of puzzled resignation and anxiety on his large, smooth face. Amy moved about with an aimless air, and a facial expression to match her husband's. Tom sat beside a window near the door, peering out past the barns and across the road at the dark, dulled edge of the forest. His hands trembled on a shot-gun which lay across his knees.

"What has happened?" I asked. "What's chased you indoors?"

Three pairs of eyes were turned upon me. Tom's were tragic, desperate, haunted; but he made a show of spirit.

"We weren't chased in!" he cried sharply. Then, his voice fallen flat and low, "We haven't been out—not farther than the barns," he added. He turned his face back to the window. "Can't you see that it's raining?" he asked fretfully. "We don't have to work in the rain. D'ye think I'm a beggar? Dear heaven! You don't know a damn thing about it! None of you!"

He sounded childish. Worse than that! He sounded insane—crazy with fear. The realization that one brother could be so terrified as this of another was shocking. It was against nature. It had a background of black and crawling shadows that daunted my imagination. But what had pressed him down to this new and lower pit of terror? Was it what I had said about the scar? But why? He did not love Henry.

There was not rain enough to discourage a man of sugar or of salt; but I did not say so. I also refrained from remarking on the presence of the gun in his lap. Both hammers were up; so I thought it wise not to excite him. Fear had evidently unhinged his mind. This was a sickening reflection, for I liked him. I believed him to be honest and kindly. As he peered out through the wet pane, I took an eye-full of the weapon across his knees. It was evidently the same piece that had been under his bolster last night. It was double-barreled and of an ancient model, a muzzle-loader. A copper cap glistened on each nipple, under each cocked hammer. I did not like the look of it. Suppose his insanity suddenly increased to the stage at which he would not know his friends from his enemies? I turned away from him—but not without a mighty effort of will. I felt an unpleasant ghost of sensation between my shoulders, as if I carried a painted bulls-eye there. But I went slowly, with a casual air, over to Sol Bear. I spoke in a low voice.

"What is he afraid of?" I asked.

"I dunno. You told 'im," replied Sol, out of a corner of his mouth.

"He was afraid yesterday."

"Sure."

"But he is more afraid now."

"Sure. Scare to deat'. You scare 'im last night."

"But he had the gun under his bolster when I went into his room."

"Sure. Keep 'im thar all the time for fear someone try to set the barns afire when it's dark."

"But the ax on his bed?"

"Sure, he was scare before, but you scare 'im crazy."

Amy brought the coffee-pot from the stove. I sat down at the cluttered table and drank and ate. Then I lit my pipe and pushed back my chair.

"Didn't old Glashner come home last night?" I asked.

"No, he don't come yet," said Sol. "Damn good t'ing he never come."

"Here he comes now!" exclaimed Deblore. "And alone." He lowered the hammers of his gun softly and stood the weapon against the wall. "But you keep an eye on him, Sol. I'll keep an eye out the window."

"You scared of him?" queried Sol.

"He's a tool," returned the other hurriedly. "He'll do what he's been told to do—if it is as I fear, have every reason to fear."

Suddenly remembering that I was supposed to be dead, I retreated up the back stairs. But I did not go to the place of dust and decay in the pitch of the roof. I felt, without knowing why, that the matter of fooling old Ruben Glashner and his confederate was not now as important as it had been. I felt that the menace to my life had passed. I had seen the killer helpless on his back. And yet the whole affair had become more awesome and mysterious. Tom Deblore's reason was shaken; and I now felt an anxiety more depressing, though nameless, than that which I had experienced when I believed my life to be in deadly peril. I retired to my big bedroom and locked the door. There I sat in a musty armchair for two solid hours, waiting, wondering, harkening to rats in the walls and birds in the chimneys and trying to soothe my nerves with tobacco.

I heard a rapping on the door, and then Tom's voice asking admittance. I unlocked and opened for him.

"He has gone back," exclaimed Tom. "He was dazed. Not a word out of him except when he asked for whisky. Ate without being invited—helped himself—and like a wolf. I gave him whisky, some that I'm not sure about. He didn't even pretend he was deaf. Sort of scared, lost look in his eye. Something has happened. You know the way, Giddy. I'd like to know what's happened. I'd go myself, only I —well, I don't know the way."

"I'll go, with pleasure," I said. "And I'll take Lion. How much of a start has he?"

"He left the kitchen about ten minutes ago."

The sky was still low and gray, the little wind from the east had died out, and the warm rain was still seeping down. Lion and I stepped out briskly. I felt no anxiety now as to my personal safety, for I did not believe old Ruben to be dangerous in daylight; and it was my opinion that the thing now troubling him, the cause of his dazed manner, was the death of his confederate. I believed that Henry Deblore had died of his wound, despite his murderous boast. This had been my first thought when Tom had told me of the change in Ruben; but I had not mentioned it at the time. They were brothers, after all.

Old Glashner could not have made the most of his ten minutes' start: he must have dawdled by the way, for upon rounding a trespassing wedge of alders we beheld him within twenty-five yards of us. He had his back to us and was plodding heavily forward, stooped even more than was usual with him. Over his shoulder showed a rusty pick and a rusty spade. It was evident to me at a glance that he had not heard us. Lion and I backed to the screen of alders and there crouched. When we ventured forth again, he was out of sight beyond a bend in the old road. From that point onward we advanced with proper circumspection. We did not catch sight of him again on the road.

A pick-ax and a spade? They were well worth considering. Could it be that the old man was on his way to the scene of his nocturnal labors in the hardhack? Perhaps he had lost the tools with which he had already delved and prodded. If this were so, did it mean that his confederate, Henry Deblore, was so far recovered as to be able to look after himself for hours at a time? Or did it mean that old Ruben was so heartless, or so eager in his search for treasure, that he did not care what became of the wounded man. The first theory struck me as impossible, the second as highly improbable. I was convinced that Henry's wound was serious. From what I had seen in the lean-to shelter, from what I knew of Ruben, and from what I had heard of old Henry Deblore, I judged it to be unlikely that the one-eyed man, the fool and tool, would take any liberties with the scarred man, the killer, his mas-

ter, so long as the latter had a spark of life left in him or a gleam in his devilish eyes. But perhaps Ruben was not going treasure-digging. Perhaps the rusty pick and spade were for the excavation of a grave. This explanation of old Ruben's changed manner and dreary equipment still seemed my best bet.

The big dog and I turned off the logging road into the woods at the marks which I had made in the green moss. In due course I gained a view of the little dell in which I had first discovered the fire and rustic shelter of the conspirators. The shelter was still there, but it was now empty. The fire was only a smokeless mound of ashes now, black and gray under the slow rain. The fact that the brushy lean-to was no longer occupied by a blanket-swathed figure disconcerted me for a moment, but a sight of old Ruben Glashner stooped at the near edge of the dead ashes reassured me. The old man was busy, but his motions were slow and feeble. He was picking into the rooty forest loam. He was a dreary figure in a dreary picture, stooped almost double there in the gray rain against a background of drenched ashes and dripping spruces. He did not straighten his back even with the backward swing of the pick-ax.

Lion and I crawled closer to the desolate encampment. Presently I saw what I was looking for, the one feature to complete the cheerless scene to my satisfaction. This was the blanket-swathed figure. It lay in a bed of half-grown bracken within a few yards of where old Ruben picked so wearily at the rooty ground.

"Dead," I whispered. "The killer has made his last kill."

Lion saw and understood. He swept his fine brush from side to side.

The grave-digger's motions became slower and feebler. At last he loosed his hold on the haft of the pick and turned away, leaving the iron in the ground. He moved slowly to the shelter, dragging his feet. His hands were on the small of his back, and he twitched with his efforts to straighten himself. His efforts were only partially successful. Within the shelter he stooped low again, then stood more nearly perpendicular than I had ever seen him. Now he held a large black bottle in his right hand, the clutch of his earthy fingers on its neck. He raised it to his lips, tipped it and threw back his head. The lump in his thin throat twitched convulsively a dozen times or more.

He returned to the pick, jerked it out, swung it and drove it deep. He repeated the performance with undiminished vigor, once, twice, yet a third time; and I began to hope that the grave would be dug within the hour. Then his vigor slackened. He hung over the pick with bowed back. He wrenched and jerked to get it out of the ground. He staggered on the upward swing. He came within an ace of crumpling at the top of the swing. I became impatient. I wanted to go home and change my clothes; but, before that, I was determined to witness the burial of Henry Deblore. I would speed things up, to this end, even if I had to lend a hand with pick and spade. I arose to my feet and stepped forward from the wet cover in which I had crouched. Lion shook himself and followed close.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

The digger had completed his swing and now sagged over the slanted haft. He had been breathing hard and wiggling feebly at the haft when I spoke, but at the first sound of my voice he seemed to cease to breathe. His feeble wriggling motion, evidently intended to bring the pick clear of the earth, also ceased. His head ceased to wobble. He became as a hunched, grotesque figure of wood. I halted and stood waiting, with a hand in my pocket, wondering if he were armed and dangerous. It did not seem likely; and yet it was quite evident that he was contemplating something. I felt no anxiety, however, knowing that I'd have the draw on him if shooting should prove to be the move he was considering. He was certainly considering something, considering it hard. So I stood motionless, wondering and waiting, with the big dog motionless beside me.

At last the old man's head began to move. Nothing stirred but his head, not a muscle of any other part of him. It turned slowly in my direction, bringing his ignoble face slowly into my view. His single eye came to bear on me; and then, with a choking scream, he collapsed and lay still. This recalled to my mind the fact that he believed me to be dead, murdered.

I strode forward, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and yanked him to his

feet. I felt no pity for him. He had planned my murder. I put him on his feet, but his legs were useless. He flopped and again lay humped. I found a kettle of cold tea in the shelter and poured it in his face, soggy leaves and all. He gasped and moaned, but did not open his eye. He whimpered.

"Get up!" I cried. "Get to work, you dirty old sneak! Dig it big enough for two, you murdering old fool. But I'm not dead. I don't need a grave. Get up and get to work; and dig it deep."

He opened his eye.

"You see me," I continued, "alive—but more dangerous than any ghost. Get up, or I'll set Lion on you. He's just waiting for the word."

The big dog growled and curled his upper lip away from his teeth; and Ruben Glashner scrambled to his feet. I looked at him, keeping nothing of what I thought and felt about him from my eyees.

"Have you found the treasure?" I asked, sneering.

He swallowed hard and shook his head.

"Come here," I said, and stepped over to the body in the ferns.

It was covered completely from the feet to the crown of the head.

"Let me see his face," I ordered. "Turn down the blanket."

He obeyed. The eyes of the murderer had not been closed after death. They were wide open, staring, blank. The lower jaw sagged.

"Is it Henry Deblore?" I asked.

"Sure it's Henry," answered Ruben. "He said he was; an' I'd ought to know. We was old friends, Hen an' me. He remembered everythin'."

"He was shot when you two were digging out on the hardhack."

"Sure, but it wasn't much. He was a sick man that night anyhow, but he wouldn't own to it."

"It killed him," I said. "Whoever fired that shot did a good thing; and if there'd been a second bullet for you it would have been better."

"But he was sick already, ain't I told ye! His left arm all swelled an' black. Sick as a dog. Couldn't keep nothin' down but brandy. It was the shot in his left hand done for 'im, from yer own little pistol. But he wouldn't own to it. He said he cured that when he shot yerself down the crick. An' so it had ought to done. Kill the dog that bit ye an' ye don't git hydrophoby." He paused, staring at me with his one eye. He wagged his head. "But ye ain't dead," he continued. "If ye was, he wouldn't of died. But we cal'lated ye was done for, so he held it was the nick in his shoulder—no more'n a scratch—got 'im."

"He was planning some more murders," I said.

"Sure, he was a-plannin' some more," replied Ruben, with a note of admiration in his crazy voice. "Thar was the Jeanbards, an' thar was Tom. The girl found 'im out somehow, an' she must of blabbed to Jules or someone. He reckoned to kill her an' Jules, anyhow. That was him—afeared of nobody nor nothin'. I wish I was like that."

"You poor fool," I said. "If you were like that, if you had even a murderer's courage, you'd be dangerous. It's the insane asylum for you. Get under cover there, and sit down. I'll take a spell at digging."

He turned away and entered the shelter. Lion walked after him; and on second thoughts, so did I. But I would have been a few seconds too late. He snatched a rifle from beneath a blanket on the ground and turned in a flash. But the big dog, having more sense than I had, was in time. He sprang hard and straight. The rifle whanged, a bullet went skyward, and Ruben Glashner struck the ground with the flat of his back. I picked up the rifle and called Lion off. Then I dragged the old man out and set him to work. Lion and I sat in the shelter and watched him pick and dig. I was pitiless. I made no allowance for his insanity. When he begged me for drink, I gave him the bottle from which he had already imbibed freely, which was still half-full. I was not interested in his health. He was welcome to kill himself, either with over-exertion or over-indulgence in liquor. I was concerned only with the digging of the grave.

He took a long time about it. He rested frequently, sometimes lying on his face and sometimes on his back. If he lay too long, I sent Lion out to persuade him to resume his labor.

"He is aching for an excuse to kill you," I said, on one of those occasions. "He knows of your attempts to poison him, just as well as I know why you advised me to paddle down to the settlement that morning."

He did not say a word. He resorted frequently to the bottle for strength.

A little later, I told him of my clever work with the fly-leaf from the ancient book and a pen dipped in tincture of iodine. It took him a long time to believe

that. He was incredulous. He even made verbal protest, assuring me that it must be a true and correct map because Henry had accepted it as such, and Henry had never been fooled.

At last the grave took him to his elbows, and the bottle was empty. I went over and found him collapsed in the bottom of the hole he had dug. I dragged him out, rolled the dead man in, and set to work with the spade. Having filled the grave level, and scattered the surplus soil, I looked about me for some simple means of concealing it. The chance discovery of a grave in the woods is almost certain to start surmises and rumors and perhaps lead to enquiries. Old Glashner still lay where I had dropped him, unconscious. I gathered large, mossy stones from close at hand and laid them on the spaded earth. But this was not concealment enough. I scattered several spade-fulls of sodden ashes among the stones. Even this did not satisfy me; so I tore down the brush and slender poles of the lean-to and piled them upon the grave. But the brush was wet and would require dry stuff to kindle it to flame. There was plenty of such material around me in the forest—dead branches of spruces and firs, and birch-bark curling to be pulled. But I stepped over for a look at old Glashner before going after it. He opened his one eye at me. His face was flushed and his eye was wild. He sat up, only to lie back again.

"Hen's hard," he said. "He'll work a man to the bone, an' then into the grave. He used ter be like that—an' now he's worse. The same, only worse. Thar never was a man in the country, only me, could keep friends with 'im. But he ain't jist the same now as afore he went away."

"He is dead now, and buried, so why worry," I answered.

I went in among the trees to gather kindlings, leaving Lion to keep an eye on the old man. I took the rifle with me. I soon returned with as much dry brush and bark as I could get two arms around. After placing this, I moved old Ruben to a spot at the edge of the dell and in the shelter of a wide-limbed spruce. He was quite off his chump, muttering and mumbling. I had to lift him and carry him. He was hot as fire. I felt his heat through his wet clothes and my own. I was glad to put him down.

The fire was a success. Once the flame from the dry stuff had taken hold, it went with a roar. At first it was all smoke, white smoke thick as oil gushing through and coiling and crawling straight up into the rain. The rain beat the acrid smell of it back to earth. Old Ruben rolled and muttered where he lay on the moss beside me.

"The house is afire," he gabbled. "The house is afire. Thar goes Tom—an' them injuns—an' good riddance. Hen, ye're the devil himself! Worse'n ye used ter be. Never a word of Holy Scripture now to sweeten it, like in the old days. The money is all we want, Hen, an' we's good as got our hands on it now. An' a man hadn't ought to burn his own brother to death that a-way. It ain't natural—An' the barns, too. D'ye hear the hosses jumpin' an' lashin' out? God's will be done!"

He sank back, exhausted. I scouted around, on the lookout for falling sparks; but the rain took care of the sparks. The fire devoured the brush and poles to white and rusty red ashes and a network of black charcoal. I called to Lion and walked off, with the rifle in the crook of my arm, leaving old Ruben still prostrate and muttering in the partial shelter of the big spruce and the warm rain still dredging down softly and penetratingly. I felt a vast relief. Our enemy was dead, and his grave was hidden, and his poor mad tool was now nothing but a thing to abhor and despise and forget. I felt a vast satisfaction. I had lifted a curse from the old house of Moosemeadows Park.

The big dog halted and looked back through the wet woods several times. At

the edge of the logging-road, I, too, paused uncertainly. I turned and looked back. I hesitated.

"If he is insane, then of course he is not to blame," I said.

Lion wagged his tail. If there was ever a thorough good sportsman, it was that dog.

We retraced our steps through the drenching underbrush, under the dripping boughs. We found the old man exactly where we had left him. I found the tea-kettle, and then a little spring at an edge of the dell. I deluged his face and neck with water until he turned over and the nature of his breathing became less desperate. I found a packet of coffee, and other provisions, and empty bottles, in a bag and a basket on the ground where the lean-to had been. I blew and fed a nest of red embers to flame and boiled coffee. I drank of the coffee myself, then poured a good dose of it into the old man, and it seemed to revive him.

He was not an easy thing to carry in one's arms; but I carried him. I laid him down frequently, for a few minutes at a time. I was more than half-way home, and feeling worse than Sinbad during his adventure with the Old Man of the Sea, when Sol Bear suddenly appeared out of the wet dusk. He was relieved to see me. He was even glad, so glad that he said so. When I told him that the man with the scarred head was not only dead, but buried deep, his face lighted as if a ray of sunshine had found it. He relieved me of my burden without a word or look of protest. By industrious questioning, I gathered that Tom had been limp with blue funk ever since my departure, had expressed his fears for my safety as time passed, yet had refused to allow Sol to go to my assistance and yet had been afraid to go himself. He had sat at the window, through all those hours, with the gun across his knees. Sol had never seen anyone in so absolute and prolonged a state of terror. Sol had finally defied him and walked out.

It was long past supper-time when we reached the house, but there was no sign of supper and even the lamp had not been lit. Sol opened the door and cried, "Giddy's a'right an' here he is," and Lion ran into the kitchen with Duster and Spud at his heels. As Sol and I followed the dogs, I said, "We've got old Ruben here, too, and he is just about all in."

I heard Deblore stand his gun against the wall.

"Where's the—the other?" he asked.

"Where he won't do any more harm," I answered.

Just then Amy Bear struck a match and lit the lamp on the table. Sol deposited old Glashner on the floor. I turned to Tom, who was leaning forward in his chair with his eyes fixed on me.

"It is all right," I said. "He was dead when I got there. Ruben dug his grave and I buried him."

Tom's whiskers were working. "Are you sure of that?" he asked. "Dead—that man with the puckered eye-brow and scarred forehead? Will you swear to that?"

"I know a dead man when I see one," I replied. "Don't be a fool! Brace up, for Heaven's sake! He is under three feet of earth and rocks. Go dig him up and take a look, if you don't believe me."

Tom leaned back in his chair, without a word. He sat like that for several minuts, silent and motionless. He sighed like a diver coming up from deep water, reached for the old gun, picked the caps from the nipples and let down the hammers. He threw the caps away, got briskly to his feet and walked over to where Ruben Glashner lay muttering on the floor. As he studied Ruben, I studied him. He looked like a new man. There was not the faintest suggestion of regret in his eyes. They twinkled. He had no cause to love his brother, of course, and evidently plenty of cause to fear him; but it seemed to me that he might have at least assumed an expression of decent gravity.

"Is our clever friend under the weather?" he asked.

"I'll be surprised if he lives till morning," I said. "His mind is gone, anyway. I'm afraid that I was rather hard on him."

"He's drunk, for one thing—the old blackguard," said Tom with a chuckle. "If that's all that ails him, he'll be on his feet again by morning. Drink's a thing he'll never die of."

"He is drunk, sure enough," I answered. "But that is not all. For one thing, he was very nearly scared to death—just as you have been recently. You were in such a rotten funk that you wouldn't leave the house to help me, though you thought I was in deadly peril."

"I'm sorry," he said. "If you realized my relief—If you knew all—When I tell you—but not just now!—you'll understand. But what about our friend here?" He laughed suddenly. "I am thinking of what I put up with from that old fool, just for fear of my neighbors—of those clod-

hoppers in the settlement. God! Now I would send the old beast packing in a minute, if he were able to walk—and think no more of it than of filling my pipe. Public opinion! Neighbors! Envious, sneaking clodhoppers! If I ever hear any more threats from the settlement I'll hire a brace of police-detectives to watch them. You see, Giddy? Now I realize how little I had to be apprehensive of. Today—this day's hell—has opened my eyes, corrected my values."

"Today? But you were afraid yesterday," I said.

"Naturally—since the moment of hearing of the attempt on your life. I was apprehensive. Call it fear, if you will. But terror!" He turned to Amy, who was at

the stove, and requested her to speed up the supper. He indicated the old man on the floor with an airy gesture. "Put him to bed, Sol," he said. "I can afford to be merciful." He walked to the door and looked out. "The rain is over. A breath from the west. Stars will be showing in a few minutes." He returned to the table, rubbing his hands together cheerily.

XI

TOM DEBLORE sounded not only light-hearted, but light-headed, during supper. My mood was not quite in sympathy with his. Far from it. I was tired, nerves and spirit and body. I was glad to have the murderer under the sod, of course; but Tom's merry chatter struck me as being very far out of place and time. I am sure that Sol felt the same way about it, for he did not once crack a smile. It seemed to me that the least Tom might do, under the circumstances, was show a decent sense of shame for his recent exhibition of funk. His silly chatter and merry twinklings of the eyes impressed me as being immodest and ill bred.

He took a turn the other way, toward the end of the meal. After a silence of several minutes he suddenly put out a hand and grabbed me by the left wrist. He leaned toward me.

"Are you quite certain that this is so?" he asked. "Sure of the man, and sure that he is dead?"

"It is the man who pretended to be a peddler, and he is dead and buried," I answered.

"Puckered eyebrow, scarred forehead, black eyes?"

"Yes, everything. I buried him as I found him."

"Had he a crooked finger on his left hand?"

"I've never seen his left hand. It was in a bandage. Don't be a fool! You've been drinking."

"One can't be too sure, in a case of this kind. We must make sure."

He pushed his chair back and jumped to his feet. "Sol, you keep an eye on the poor fool upstairs," he said. "Give him a dose of quinine. Giddy, you come with me. Light a lantern, Amy."

"What's the great idea?" I asked.

"I'm going to see the grave," he replied. "One can't be too sure."

I lost my grip on my temper at that. I told him that he could go and look at the grave as often as he liked, by night or by day, but that he would go alone, as far I was concerned. I told him, without picking my words to save his feelings, that I had been out and active, in his questionable interests, while he had been sitting at home, helpless with terror.

"I have stood the brunt of all this murderous, mysterious, dirty family affair of yours—the dogs and I," I concluded. "You have been useless. I have shot and been shot at; and now you doubt my word. But for me—but let that go! Lion is worth ten of you, for intelligence as well as courage. You must be either mad or a fool!"

He heard me out patiently. "Much of what you say is true, Giddy," he replied. "But I'm an old man, and your friend, and you mustn't be too hard on me. I want you to know everything, for I'm sure that you'll then understand. You have saved me, I do believe, and shown unwavering courage and resource, as was only to be expected. Yet again I must ask you to be patient with me a little longer."

I sighed. "Come along," I said. "I'll carry the lantern."

What else could I do? The old man's mildness was at once pitiful and impressive. There was no doubting his sincerity.

We walked the whole way in silence. The rain had ceased, and the sky was clearing slowly, unveiling pale stars one by one. I halted in the centre of the wide circle of ashes and charcoal and set down the lantern.

"Here is the grave," I said. "I tried to hide it."

Tom stood beside me and gazed down at the ashes at our feet.

"That a dead man lies there I do not doubt for a moment," he said. "It is the identity of the dead man that I must make sure of."

"But you know who he is," I said.

"I think I do, Giddy. I must be absolutely sure."

"You would dig up your brother?"

"That is the question. Have patience with me, Giddy—for a little longer. The thing is vital to my peace of mind. Where are the tools you dug with?"

I retrieved pick and spade from where I had flung them. I ceased to question and protest. What was the use? I was tired and my bewilderment was greater than ever. We worked in silence, scraping ashes aside, lifting rocks aside and displacing the loose soil.

"There you are," I said, at last. "Whoever it is, I hope to heaven it's the person you think it is"; and I sat down on the edge of the hole and lit a cigarette.

Tom lay flat, lowered the lantern in one hand and turned back a corner of the blanket with the other. Thus he lay, silent and motionless, for fully half a minute. Then he replaced the blanket, drew up the lantern and raised himself to his knees.

"Thank God!" he said; and if ever a man meant it, Tom Deblore did.

"Is it your brother?" I asked.

"No. It is as I feared when you mentioned the scar, and as I hoped when you reported his death. It is not Henry."

"But old Glashner thinks he is Henry."

"Ruben did not know the other. Henry was the only bad man he knew."

"But——"

"He would deceive Ruben, of course—pretend that he was Henry come back for the treasure. It would not be difficult. He had heard of my brother, and of the rumor of a treasure. He had heard of Henry's terrible record and black name. He and I were once friends—damn him! Later, we became enemies. Henry? Henry Deblore was a bungler, a child, an amateur, compared to that man. He was clever as sin. He was sin. And he had power. Men feared him, thousands of men. And he had great wealth. I fled for my life. He must have lost his money."

"But your first thought was of your brother, when you heard of the attempt on my life."

"True. That was the logical suspicion, though I have thought for years that Henry must be dead. The truth struck me when you spoke of the scar and the black eyes. He hated me, but he was practical. He never risked power to indulge hate. He must have lost everything, to have come all this distance to indulge an old hate—for he was practical, you know. And he wanted money, it seems, the legendary treasure. Even if it were real, it would be no more than chicken-feed to that man. He must have been down and out. But I knew that if he were here he would kill—that my death and a dozen more would not be enough to appease his rage and hate. He would not leave one stone of the old house upon another. He would devastate the country."

"But the Jeanbards? Rose Jeanbard warned me. She must have thought he was Henry."

"She would, if she thought anything bad of him, just as Ruben Glashner accepted him as Henry. But he isn't Henry. He is one who robbed in millions and murdered in thousands; and there he lies—harmless."

"I laid him there," I said; and I told him of my two hysterical shots at the shaking alder beside the moosemeadow, and of the old peddler who got Rose Jeanbard to dress his wounded hand, and of how the terrible one had died of blood-poisoning from that wound.

We replaced the earth and the mossy stones and burned more brush on and around the grave. Tom Deblore worked as if he were to be paid for the job and whistled as he worked. On the way home and in the kitchen after our arrival, he told a queer story.

XII

THIS is the story Tom Deblore told me that night. The matter of it is all here, though the manner is more mine than his.

Tom Deblore sailed the seas, east and south, for close upon fifteen years. He worked his way aft. Though he was not remarkable in that life, he was decently successful. For three years he was a master, berthed and certified as such. Then, in his thirty-fifth year, he accepted employment ashore in Dutch Guiana with Doctor Javais. Eugene Javais was a savant, an explorer, and a man of affairs, who had been continuously domiciled and active in and about the three Guianas and

adjacent states ever since his early youth. He was recognized by governments, and in learned circles abroad, as an authority on the languages and histories and habits of several obscure tribes of the far interior. Socially, he was a delight to those planters, officials, merchants and ship-masters whom business or chance threw in his way and to whom he took a liking. He entertained almost every evening when at home in his fine house behind the town. He was famous for his wit and his wines. His local reputation as a host was as high as his reputation abroad as a savant. He was rich in more than knowledge, personal charm and friendship. Plantations, mines, even controlling interests in mercantile firms were his, some inherited from his father, others acquired later by purchase or personal enterprise. Having twice entertained him to dinner, Doctor Javais offered Captain Deblore a responsible and remunerative position ashore.

"I need a right-hand man," he had said, turning slightly in his chair and holding a candle from the table to Tom's cigar.

"One of your quality, Captain. Resign from your command and join me tomorrow, to our mutual benefit and satisfaction."

Tom puffed his cigar alight, removed it from his lips and eyed the coal, then said, "Done, sir." That was the way it happened, on the veranda, after dining. It was done without formality and without attracting the attention of any of the other men lingering around after dinner.

Tom cabled to the owners next morning, handed the barkentine over to Mr. Spike and had his personal possessions moved ashore and up to the doctor's big house, where an airy suite was at his disposal. He found Javais to be as affable an employer as he had been an affable host. Not a word was said about his duties nor, for some time, about his salary. They rode together each morning, very early; and, after showers in the garden bath-house, they breakfasted together. During breakfast the doctor read letters and then passed them over to Tom (with a very occasional exception) one by one, without comment or instructions. Some were from managers of plantations near at hand and upcountry, some from foreign agents and a few from the superintendents of mines. Tom read them all with care and as intelligently as was possible under the circumstances. He was present in the library each morning, by request, when the replies to this correspondence were dictated to the young Scottish-Brazilian secretary. For the rest of the day, until dinner-time, he was free to do as he chose and come and go as he pleased. Thus two weeks passed; and then one night Javais said that he was starting for the hinterland next morning. He handed over a potent legal document known as a "Power of Attorney."

"You now have a very good idea of my affairs and of my policy," he said. "Use your own judgment. McPhail will advise you on minor points—routine, detail. I hope to be back in three months' time."

Tom was staggered, but he made an effort to conceal the fact. He promised to do his best. He did his best. He found that his knowledge of the doctor's numerous enterprises was greater than he had thought. He worked hard, and he used his own judgment upon occasions. McPhail, the young Scottish-Brazilian secretary, expressed wonder and admiration. Three months passed, and a fourth month; and then Doctor Javais drove up in a hired carriage just in time to bathe and dress before dinner, accompanied by a stranger. He was in his usual good spirits, though he was burned black and had lost fully twenty pounds of flesh. He embraced Tom, then presented the stranger to him as Señor Louis Romero.

Javais did not explain this Romero. Tom could not place him. He was swarthy as an Indian, but his eyes were Latin. He was lean as a hound, languid in his

movements and yet capable of amazingly sudden and swift action. His manner, like his face, was at times animated, but more often as still and detached as an Indian's. Toward Deblore he was friendly, even cordial, from the first. He lived in the big house behind the town, rode with the doctor and Tom in the early mornings, dawdled around all day and took a dignified part every evening in those quiet social affairs that were so dear to the good heart of Eugene Javais. He had a way with the servants, the most indolent of whom quickened at a glance from him as if prodded with a pin. Young McPhail, the secretary, was quite obviously afraid of him. One night, after the last guest had gone, Tom received an informal visit from Louis Romero. Tom was in pajamas, smoking a last cigarette beside an open window. Romero was still in the smart but appropriate costume of white linen and silk which the doctor had long since established as the correct evening dress for that community.

"I have been ten weeks here," he said, in Spanish. "I find your society, and that of the honored doctor, truly delightful, but the life is too dull, too guarded, for me. All this is already made, sweltering here by the old sea—by the Spanish, by the Dutch, by officials and traders and by the Señor Doctor. To fully enjoy, I would first make for myself—a city—a nation. You are younger than I am, my dear Tomas, but I am young at forty. You are of the administrators, I am of the conquerors. In twenty-five years, perhaps, when I am of the honored doctor's present age, I, too, shall give dinner-parties—or perhaps within a shorter time—but in a finer city than this. I go tomorrow."

They conversed for two hours, Romero doing most of the talking. Tom asked a number of questitons without obtaining any definite information. Romero's talk was all on a grand and inexact scale, in the grand manner; and yet it carried conviction. Tom got the impression that he knew very well what he was talking about, that his city and his nation were even then not entirely imaginary. He started inland and hillward next morning by train, that Señor Romero—his eyes afire, his swarthy face like a mask and his manner languid. His last words to Tom were imparted in a whisper. "I shall need your help very soon, my dear Tomas."

A year passed; and if Javais had news of Romero during those twelve months, he made no mention of it to Tom Deblore. Tom and the doctor continued to live in the big house on the best of terms; but Tom did more and more of the business, and the doctor gave more and more of his time to historical and literary work and correspondence with learned societies and brother savants. And then the doctor set out on another trip up-country; and again, after an absence of four months, he returned with the Señor Louis Romero. But this was a different Romero, a sick señor with bloodless cheeks and feeble hands and a bandaged head. And again the doctor neglected to explain him.

Romero regained his strength quickly. In a week's time he was able to walk around his room on the arm of his servant, or Tom or the doctor; and within two weeks of his arrival the last bandage was removed from his head. The wound was healed—but, Lord, the scar! When he was strong enough to dine downstairs and meet the doctor's guests, he always donned a skull-cap of black silk as a part of his evening dress. The cap came low, but not low enough to hide the cleft eyebrow. His manner toward Tom was even more friendly, if that were possible, than it had been during his previous visit. He told Tom that he had received his terrible wound in a battle from which he had been dragged out by a few faithful followers.

"But for the wound, I would have been victorious," he said, "and you would have been administrating a nation now."

He talked in a vein that went to Tom's head. His most amazing statements carried conviction. When fully recovered in health, he vanished again into the hinterland. It was soon after this that the doctor began to show signs of restlessness. He sold out his interest in the firm of Da Silva & McCall, importers and exporters.

"We have no time to bother our heads with these old, established enterprises," he said to Tom; and in that Tom saw the Romero touch.

He sold other interests of the same nature and several of his nearer plantations. He spoke of his fine house as "an elephant on his hands." He spoke disparagingly of the town, comparing it to a graveyard in one breath and to a country market in the next. He spoke slightingly of the society it afforded. Tom asked him if he contemplated a removal to Europe, to Paris. He answered that he was seriously considering something of the kind. The rest of his plantations were sold in the course of the week. On Saturday night he said, "My dear friend, we must come to a decision and an understanding. I am

a rich man. Wealth makes a free man. Europe calls to my intellect, but the country behind calls to my heart. Shall we go east or west—eastward to the real civilization, or westward to the unspoiled hills where there is nation-building to be done?"

Tom said that the doctor would have no use for his services in Europe. The doctor made no reply to that; but he drew an English coin from his pocket, flipped it into the air, caught it and clapped his hand on the edge of the table.

"Head, and I feed my brain: shield, and I feed my heart," he said.

He lifted his hand. Shield it was; and they were on their way two weeks later. They traveled by train, by saddle, afoot and by pirogue. They met friends everywhere, friends of the doctor; in towns, in villages, on lonely plantations and at isolated mines. Savages appeared from overhanging coverts and greeted Javais and talked with him in languages known to few white men. The good doctor received warnings at which he smiled and shook his head. They entered those masterless regions over which no force or government of white men have established a claim, but into which many reckless officials, Spanish, Dutch, French and British, have disappeared forever. There they were deserted by all the members of their numerous company save two. These two had joined them only the day before; and now they evinced neither surprise nor perturbation. One continued on the forward way in a small one-man pirogue, and the other lit a fire and then hung the white men's hammocks and mosquito-bars. Tom felt uneasy; but the doctor, smoking a green cigar in his hammock, assured him that all was well. The doctor was right. The fellow who had gone up-stream returned before dark, accompanied by a dozen armed Indians and a white man with a Springfield rifle. (From this point, Tom Deblore's narrative became somewhat fragmentary and confusing.) The town was reached two days later. It was situated in a sloping valley on a mountain. Its population numbered several thousands, about four hundred of whom were whites or near-whites. There were low houses of stone and lower huts of wattle. For generations, the town had been a refuge for outlaws and outcasts from civilization. Tom and Doctor Javais were escorted to the best house in the place. Romero was absent at the time, with his army, bringing an outlying village or tribe under subjection—rounding out his state. He returned a few days later and embraced the doctor and Tom. He was now known by the style and title of Don Louis. Tom became governor of the town and the Don's confidential adviser. And now a queer state of affairs came to Tom's notice. While Romero had been acquiring vast sections of this debatable land by conquest, from outlaws and savages, Javais had been purchasing large areas of it from such established governments as laid claim to it. Though he had paid twice, and in one case thrice, he had bought cheap. The doctor and Louis Romero were evidently in partnership; and the doctor's deeds from the governments of Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil gave a color of legality to the actions and acquisitions of the Don. Don Louis always spoke of himself, and officially signed himself, as President of the Republic of Uacayari; but he was an absolute monarch.

Tom was a great man, and Don Louis was his friend. Doctor Javais spent money with a free hand, laying out new streets, building houses, carving plantations from the jungle and building roads. Also, he studied the tribes and wrote books. "We are creators," he said. He built a school and taught in it himself. Don Louis never criticized the doctor's activities and benevolence, nor did he interfere with them, but he sometimes smiled at them. He, too, was having roads made and plantations cleared and streams bridged far and near—but he was not paying wages to the laborers. He and his army were seldom in the capital for more than a few days at a time. Doctor Javais built a hospital and put an outlawed Spanish medico in charge of it. His own degree of doctor was not in medicine, but in philosophy. There was a square at the lower end of the town which was used by the tradesmen and peons as a market-place. Here beggars and cripples sat all day, displaying or voicing their misfortunes and asking alms. One of these was a white man, evidently of Spanish blood. He was dumb, for he had lost his tongue; he was blind, for both eyes were gone; and his right hand and both feet were missing. He always sat apart from the other unfortunates, with his back against a wall, silent and motionless. He was brought to his place every morning, and taken away every night, in a little hand-cart drawn by a very old man.

Tom questioned the people about him, and received only frightened shakes of the head in answer. He questioned the old man, but without success. He gave coppers to that extraordinary cripple almost every day, and often a silver coin.

Trading expeditions came in from time to time from the civilized world, under escort supplied by Don Louis. They brought mining machinery, rifles, linens and silks, drugs, and even a few books for Doctor Javais. Occasionally, members or followers of such expeditions remained in the hillside town and established businesses there, or settled on the land, under the protection of the governor. Thus the population grew. But this was not its only manner of increase. Don Louis sometimes brought in a hundred or more new citizens at a time. These were savages from the very back of beyond—from so far back that even the learned doctor was ignorant of their language. Until they realized that they were no longer laws unto themselves, they were forced to enjoy their new privileges of citizenship under somewhat exacting military and police surveilance. Six years passed, and still Tom and the Don were the best of friends. They often talked together late into the night. Tom talked of his childhood, of his family, of his distant home, of his brother Henry, even of old family legends. Romero never spoke of his youth, nor of his family, but always of this state he had made and was still making. It was extending westward every year. He said that its other boundaries would also move outward before long. He was for shouldering his big neighbors, whose symbols of power and seats of government were so far away as to seem of another world. He had won so many jungle victories that he was in danger of measuring the nations of the great world by jungle standards.

Don Louis had dozens of garrisons post-

ed in hanging jungles and above river fords; but the total numerical strength of all his scattered garrisons and outposts was never permitted to equal the strength of that remainder of his army which he always kept under his own immediate command and eye. As his conquests extended, his garrisons increased and his army grew. The garrison of the capital was half a battalion of jungle infantry commanded by a score of white and half-caste officers.

Tom Deblore walked into the barrack-yard one morning, attracted by sounds of rifle-fire, and found a firing-squad, dead men on the ground and other men lined up against a wall. The commandant of the garrison himself was in charge of these operations. The dead men and those awaiting death were all Indians, some of them soldiers and others civilian laborers domiciled in the town. Tom had heard nothing of their crime or their trial. He put the commandant under arrest, investigated the whole affair, (with Doctor Javais assisting), released the survivors, compensated the families of the dead, had the ex-commandant shot and five other officers imprisoned for long terms.

Then Don Louis came marching home; and when he heard of the affair of the garrison's commandant he lost control of his temper for a moment and seized Tom Deblore by the throat with his right hand and pulled a knife with his left. Tom was astonished; but, in spite of his astonishment, he acted swiftly. He grabbed up a lump of iron ore that held down a pile of papers on the edge of his desk, and with this, striking blindly, he met the Don's left hand. The knife clattered to the floor, his throat was released, and Don Louis staggered back with blood dripping from his mashed and broken fingers. The doctor from the hospital dressed the injured hand. The Don apologized to Tom for his violence, blamed fever and fatigue for it, and begged him not to mention the unhappy incident to Doctor Javais. But Tom had glimpsed the real Romero in those mad seconds. He had seen more than one truth during that flash of violence. Now he knew, as surely as if he had been told, that his life would not be worth a penny's purchase but for the fact that the Don saw no way yet of replacing him in his scheme of things. He was a valuable official, loved and respected in the town and throughout the country for miles around. He was just; and he and the doctor administered the entire civil government of the country between them. He and the doctor were the only white men in the country whom Romero could trust. Whenever Tom suggested his accompanying

the army on one of its extended expeditions, Don Louis discouraged the idea. He said that he could not spare Tom from the seat of government for even a day. His manner was as friendly as it had ever been.

They had been ten years in the wilderness when Doctor Javais suddenly sickened and died. Don Louis was absent from the capital at the time, controlling his western subjects. During the night before the dawn of his death, the doctor placed a little pouch of soft leather in Tom's hand. "I have saved this for you," he said. "Louis has everything else. I chose unwisely. Go back to the world, to civilization."

Tom had an Indian servant, one Pedro, who had served him ever since his arrival in the wilderness. Pedro begged Tom to depart before the Don's return. Tom replied that he was not in danger, because the Don needed him. But the servant had the better of the argument. It seems that Tom was in love and about to marry. Pedro pointed out that his master would not only lose his wife, but the doctor's gift as well, if he awaited Don Louis's return, for the Don was aware of and interested in both. And in a fit of jealousy, the great value of the Señor Governor to the state would be forgotten. To point his argument, he reminded Tom of the cripple who lacked both eyes, his tongue, his right hand and both feet, and assured him that the crippling had been the work of Don Louis. The unfortunate fellow had at one time been Romero's most trusted and useful lieutenant.

The woman was willing to flee with Tom and Pedro. She made her choice between the President and the Governor, perhaps with visions of Caracas, New York and Paris in her mind. The three reached civilization, after many hardships and dangers. There was a wedding. They put thousands of miles between themselves and the Republic of Uacayari. Tom carried wealth in the little leather pouch, the gift of the good Doctor Javais—diamonds. The three fugitives settled in Bahia, where Tom purchased a house. His wife died; and it was after her death that he got in touch again with his brother Henry, by correspondence. Henry proved himself to be a painstaking letter-writer and a sentimentalist—the damnedest rogues are frequently sentimentalists. Tom sold diamond after diamond and bought lands and houses. He speculated and lost large sums. He heard nothing of Don Louis, nothing of Uacayari, until Pedro came to him one evening, shaking with terror, and told him that he had seen three of the Don's officers in the city. Tom was then close upon sixty years of age, but he was loathe to run away and leave his property. He hesitated; and his hesitation cost the life of the trusty Pedro. Tom himself escaped by a hair's breadth; and he kept on, with only a brief halt here and there, until he reached Moosemeadows.

XIII

I WONDERED if the old man had told me everything—all his reasons for his abject fear of Louis Romero. He had told very little about the woman who had fled with him. But I asked no questions.

We nursed old Ruben Glashner assiduously, eager for his recovery; for we intended to hand him over to the Provincial Insane Asylum as soon as he was strong enough to make the journey. He was in a high fever, and we dosed him with quinine. He was delirious most of the time. We watched him and waited on him day and night, Tom and Sol and I, in turns. He did not show much improvement by nightfall of the third day, so we decided that if he was not considerably better by morning one of us would go for a doctor. Sol stood the first watch. Tom relieved Sol at midnight. I went on duty at four-thirty, half an hour late. I found Tom sound asleep in his chair, and the bed empty.

The sick man had gone by way of an open window and a clothes-line. Lion had been in the house that night, but neither of the dogs outside had given the alarm. We searched the barns and outhouses, orchards and surrounding woods—miles of country before breakfast. The dogs found a scent, only to lose it in a brook within five hundred yards of the house. After

breakfast, we followed the brook back into the forest, beating a wide front. The old fool had skipped in his night-clothes, and without his boots, so we did not think that he would get far. We kept to the brook for miles. Then it occurred to me that he might in his delirium, have revisited the scene of his last camp. Tom and Sol thought well of my idea; so I struck through the woods until I came onto the

old logging-road. I found the little glade, the ashes and charred poles just as Tom and I had left them, but no sign of old Ruben Glashner.

When I got back to the house, Tom and Sol were smoking their pipes in the kitchen and wondering what to do next.

"If the cussed old fool dies of exposure, running the woods, nobody'll be to blame but himself," said Tom.

We searched the barns again, the haymows, the oat-bins, the sheep shed, the pig and poultry houses, even the empty root-cellars. Not a sign. Sol suggested that he may have jumped into the creek to cool his fever; but our investigation of mud and deep water failed to confirm his suspicion.

I wanted to go down-stream to see the Jeanbard family. I had been wanting to do so for days, longing to go, and only a sense of duty had held me back. Now I decided to go. A young man's days and nights should not be devoted entirely to the pursuit of murderous and delirious old men. A little of that sort of thing goes a long way; and I had come in for my full share of it, heaven knows!

"In my humble opinion, the old mucker has started for home, for Indian Ledge," I said to Tom and Sol. "He is somewhere on the road. He may have reached the settlement. I'm going to find out. His appearance at the house of one of your unneighborly neighbors in his night clothes and half dead wouldn't add to your local popularity."

"To the devil with my neighbors!" retorted Tom. "I wonder that I ever worried about them. But your idea is a good one, Giddy. I'll go with you."

Tom and I set out after an early supper, in the buggy, with brandy in our flasks and blankets under the seat, in case we should find old Ruben by the wayside. In the shafts was Young Bill. I have known many tall horses and many silly horses, but never any other one horse so tall and so silly as Young Bill. But he always meant well, did Young Bill. There was Clyde in him, quite obviously, and a plumping strain of Percheron, I suspect, and a dash of rocking-horse and some sawhorse. What else, I cannot imagine; but Tom spoke vaguely of Morgan blood. Tom thought him a wonder; and Tom was right. Sol had looked so tired after harnessing him that I believe he must have had to stretch each piece of harness in turn to get it on.

"Hope he don't grow no more," Sol had said.

"I like a big horse," Tom had replied. "Saw too many stunted ones in the tropics. Rats."

Young Bill walked on his toes for half a mile, cocking his ears and looking all around as if for applause. Next, he jogged on the flat of his feet, and the buggy rocked and creaked. He stubbed along on his heels for twenty minutes or so, and I feared for the dashboard.

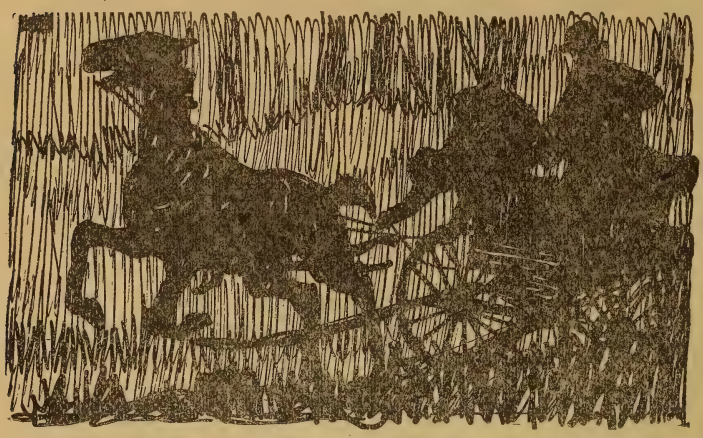
"Hard gait," I said. "I shouldn't care to ride him."

"There's nothing wrong with his gait. He'd make a first-rate saddle-horse," returned the old man; and even as he said it, Young Bill essayed to change his footwork from heel to toe and, in the changing, stubbed his toe and plunged to his knees and nose. Something broke. He floundered and staggered up; and something else broke. Tom sprang from the quaking buggy and dashed forward. Young Bill stood upright on all four legs and turned a face of distressed surprise over his shoulder. The road was soft, so his knees had escaped injury; but the harness had suffered several fractures. Tom repaired one break with salmon-twine and another with a leather strap from his pocket. We resumed our journey. Night had fallen by this time, but there were stars and a slip of moon. The big horse went through his repertoire of gaits again, with variations and without accident. He showed a little of everything except speed.

Slow as our progress was, we at last reached a point which I recognized as being about halfway between the old Deblore house and the Jeanbard cottage; and at that point and that instant of time, something—a bat in the air, a hare beside the road, a bird in a bush, or a wheel in the head—filled Young Bill with a sudden senseless panic. He snorted and lunged, tangled and untangled his hoofs, bunched and unbunched his spine and went away at a crashing gallop. Tom hung onto the reins and I clung to the seat. Above the thumping of big hoofs and the protesting creaks and groans of wheels and springs, I heard the snap of overtaxed leather. The break, wherever it was, evidently allowed Young Bill increased freedom of action, for he immediately lengthened his jumps. But not for long. Another snap! A volley of snaps! Then the rending report of a splintering shaft—and Young Bill and the buggy parted company. For a second Tom maintained his hold on the reins with his hands and hung to the dashboard

with his knees. The dashboard gave way and went out with the old man; and the buggy showed appreciation of its new-found independence by jack-knifing into the ditch. That's where and when I fell out.

Young Bill soon came back and stood



around in abject attitudes while Tom patched the wreck of his harness with twine and rope and tags of leather. I bound the broken shaft with hay-wire. The repairs took time; but at last the horse and the buggy were reunited, and every prospect of their remaining so until Young Bill's next nerve-wave was bright. But a change had come over the animal. Selecting a flat-footed walk, he stuck to it. Hares jumped and vanished before him, but he heeded them not. Bats flickered low about his head, only to be ignored. The hour grew late.

"We must be somewhere near the Jeanbard clearings," said Tom.

I replied that I had lost all sense of time and place.

"Smoke!" he exclaimed. "Do you smell it, Giddy?"

I did; and with the butt-end of the whip I coaxed Young Bill into a jouncing shuffle. The unmistakable scent grew stronger. Presently I saw a flicker of flame ahead and to the left. I returned the whip to its socket and leapt from the buggy and ran.

XIV

FIRE was flickering up all four walls of the little white house and blossoming on the roof. As I approached it, I shouted as I ran. Sparks flew up from the dry shingles; and I heard muffled barks from the little dog in answer to my shouts. A pane of glass broke with a tinkle and let out a squirt of smoke. There was fire within as well as without. I dashed at the door, staggered back from it, took a short run and pounded it with both heels. But it was a well built and securely bolted door. Tom came running up, armed with a stick from the woodpile.

"Window!" he cried. "Knock the sash clean in!"

He demonstrated with the heavy stick of maple, rammed the corners of the stout sash until the whole window fell inward. I did a dive through the hole. The little dog went out, sneezing, as I went in. Tom followed me in.

The three Jeanbards were all sound asleep, half suffocated with smoke. I found Rose and got her out single-handed. When I got into the house again I barged into someone and fell down. It was Tom, who cursed me and told me to lend a hand. We got clear with Jules and beat the sparks out of his flannelette nightshirt. Tom was swearing like a sailor and rubbing his beard with both hands; and the smell of singed hair was noticeable. I went back and stumbled about for choking ages, feeling for Jacques. I found him at last and dragged him out; and when I was able to see I saw that it was not Jacques Jeanbard whom I had last rescued, but Tom Deblore. Tom explained the mystery later. He had found and brought out Jacques, then had gone back for me and lost consciousness.

Fresh air and cold water brought the Jeanbards back to life. Every inch of the house was afire by that time. The flames stood up like spires and the sparks scraped the stars. We feared for the barns, so opened all the stables and pens and chased forth the livestock. Soon after that, the first of the neighbors from the settlement arrived, driving furiously. The Jeanbards told him what they knew about it. They had gone to bed in the house, had sensed being carried or dragged, had glimpsed a horror of heat and flame and, upon recovering full consciousness, had found themselves lying on the grass. They were full of gratitude. The neighbor glanced keenly from Tom to me, and back again, without a word. Half of Tom's beard was burned off, and his face and hands were blistered. My hands were blistered, too, and my mustache and eyebrows had rubbed off, and there were doz-

ens of black holes in my coat and shirt and trousers.

"We didn't get here a moment too soon," I admitted.

"We'd have been here in time to save the house, if Young Bill hadn't acted the fool and smashed things seven ways to Sunday," confessed Tom. "But he is not entirely to blame. His harness was several sizes too small for him, poor fellow."

The neighbor, Amos Trim by name and austere by habit, strode off and examined Young Bill and the harness and the buggy. Upon rejoining us he remarked, in a tone of reluctance, "Things was surely smashed."

More neighbors from the settlement arrived, lured and guided by the flames. Stack Glashner arrived. Stack had been on his way to see us, and had stopped for the night at Earle Smithkin's. He seemed to be suffering from great emotional and mental strain. I felt sorry for him. I drew him aside and told him about the death and burial of old Ruben's murderous confederate, of Ruben's illness and flight.

The Jeanbards were taken away by hospitable neighbors. Stack Glashner was all for accompanying them; but I told him flatly that the least he could do was to return to Moosemeadows Park with us and assist us in the search for his sick and demented relative. He could not see it in that light. He did not care whether old Ruben lived or died.

"You'll come with us, Stack," I said. "The Jeanbards can get along very well without you. They escaped death without your help. We need you, and they don't."

That got under his skin. He cursed a bit, but he headed for Moosemeadows with Tom and me and Young Bill. Tom drove and Stack and I walked. Young Bill could have pulled a ton with no more effort than a hundredweight; but our consideration was for the harness and the buggy. Stack sulked for a mile, then told me the truth of the mysterious shot at the lantern out on the hardhack.

The peddler had visited Rose Jeanbard on the day of the attempt upon my life, to have his hand attended to. She had already dressed it once, and he had fussed with it in the meantime and evidently infected it in some way. It was in a bad state, and the arm was swollen. She had dressed it again, as well as she could, despite the fear and repugnance she felt for him. Then she had noticed a strange thing. The hair of his head had slipped back several inches, and with it the smooth, weathered skin of his forehead had slipped up from his eyebrows, disclosing several inches of a slanting, disfiguring scar. She had screamed at the first shock of it. Who wouldn't scream at the sight of a man losing his scalp?

His hand had flashed to his head, and in an instant his forehead and hair had resumed their normal appearance and position. Then, realizing that he was disguised, she had sprung back from him. But he had gripped her wrist in fingers like iron before she could turn and run. He had made her swear, by all that was holy, never to tell a soul what she had seen. She had warned me. After Stack and I had departed for Moosemeadows, and Jacques had gone to bed, she had broken her oaths and told her father. Like herself, Jules had immediately taken it for granted that the disguised man was Henry Deblore. And she had gone on to tell him everything that I, Swayton, had told her about Ruben Glashner's actions, the shot at the shaking alder and the faked map. She had seen hate in her father's eyes. Evidently Jules the Fiddler had even more reason than the folk of Wicklow Creek in general to hate Henry Deblore. But Jules had gone to his room without a word. She, too, had retired, but, terrified and sensing tragedy in the air, she had sought her father, only to discover that he was nowhere in the house and that his rifle, too, was missing. She had not disturbed her brother. In the stable she had found only one of the two horses—the slower one. Terrified and conscience-stricken, she had mounted and ridden off in the direction in which she was sure her father had gone with his rifle. If her father were to kill that old man, Henry Deblore or whoever he was, she who had broken her oath would be blood-guilty and, worse still, the cause of her father's punishment. She had found the old Deblore house quiet. She had peeped in and seen the lamp burning on the table in the empty kitchen. She had found the other horse tied behind one of the barns, had tied hers beside it and run along the old logging road. When we had attempted a capture from ambush, she had been far too terrified to recognize Stack's voice. *Yes, that was Rose Jean-*

bard! And Stack had recognized her and then dropped the electric torch! She had found her father after the shooting, guided to him by the report. Stack had found them both, and they had followed us out—been behind me along those miles of logging-road. Stack had driven Rose home, leaving her father to ride one horse and lead another.

XV

THERE were several things in Stack Glashner's story of that night which failed to make a hit with me.

"Tell Miss Jeanbard not to worry," I said. "Nobody was killed that night. The old fellow was only nicked that time. I am responsible for his death, as far as I can make out. He died of blood-poisoning from the wound in his left hand."

We heard shouting ahead, far up the road, and supposed that Young Bill had again tried to show speed and again come to grief. We quickened our hard stride to a jog-trot. The shouting was repeated a few minutes later.

"We ain't gained on him," said Stack. "He's still travelin'."

We broke from the jog into a run; and still the wild shouts continued to recede before us until silenced by distance.

"The high hoss must sure be goin' some," gasped Stack.

We came to Deblore clearings, and a point on the road from which a view of the ancient homestead was obtainable, half a mile away and half-right, across stump pastures and old meadows and patches of young grain. Half a mile is a long way to see an object in the dark, unless that object happens to be illuminated, as in this case. The old mansion of Moosemeadows Park was illuminated. Lights shone at the windows, and above some of the windows—wavering lights, swelling and dwindling and swelling again.

Stack and I halted and stared, breathing hard. I blinked, mistrusting my eyes.

"Jumpin' Joshyfat!" exclaimed Stack. "Another house a-fire! What the hell?"

I believed it then; and I grasped the truth.

"Hell's right!" I said. "You had better collar your ripe old Uncle Ruben before he sets the whole countryside on fire. Two houses already tonight—and the woods at his mercy!"

We took the short-cut across the pastures and meadows and patches of young grain. Tom was there, and had burned off the remainder of his whiskers in rescuing heirlooms. Sol and Amy were safe, thanks to the dogs. Duster and Spud had given Lion the alarm from outside, and Lion had clawed Sol and Amy awake. The house was past help. All its dry old woodwork was aflame, inside and outside. The barns were not on fire; and that is another thing we had to thank the dogs for, as we afterward learned. There was not any wind; but, to be on the safe side, we turned out all the animals. Stack said nothing and worked hard. Old Tom Deblore worked hard and said, again and again, what he wished to heaven he'd done to Ruben Glashner when he had the chance. I happened on a queer thing just inside the door of one of the cow-stables. I nosed it out, after releasing the cows, and called Stack Glashner over and showed it to him. It was a splash of kerosene on the floor of tinder-dry old planks; and just outside the door, on a spot of damp muck, lay a scrap of birch-bark, charred and curled.

"It looks as if he had been interrupted here," I said. "Looks as if he'd been yanked back and out, just in the nick of time—the oil ready poured and the burning bark in his hand. There's no mistaking his touch, the old sinner! A coward even when insane and delirious—trying to burn humans and cattle in their sleep! By God, I prefer the kind of murderer who has courage to pull a trigger!"

Stack did not make an articulate reply, but groaned and cursed.

We watched the old house burn. There was nothing else to do, as th sparks continued to go straight up in the windless air. Now and then a floor broke and larger clouds of smoke and sparks gulched out and up. The old roof fell in at dawn with a crash and kicked up such a storm of blazing fragments that we were busy stamping out little flames for the next few minutes. Soon after that, Stack Glashner harnessed the dependable pair, hitched them to a dependable wagon and drove off toward the settlement, without so much as by-your-leave to Tom or me. The day grew and brightened. Within the old walls of stone the fire continued to roar and crack. We drove the livestock back to their stalls and pens—with the exception of one pig that could not be found just then. Every now and again a stone would

explode with a loud report and a piece of wall would fall into the fiery pit; and Tom would turn from whatever he was doing and gaze at the wreck with smouldering eyes. The massive chimneys stood unmarred.

"If I ever find that unspeakable old slithering beast alive I'll forget he's sick and insane and kill him like a scorpion," said Tom.

The cows were milked and driven to pasture. I wandered off toward the woods to look for the lost porker, having nothing better to do just then. I was thinking of Rose Jeanbard. I could not keep my mind off that girl. Having saved her life, I had a right to think of her. When I closed my eyes for a moment I could feel her in my arms again, almost as I had felt her when carrying her out through the blistering heat and choking smoke. I kept my eyes closed a second too long and walked slap into a stump. That reminded me of my accident beside the trail that night when Stack Glashner and I had gone out to spy on the treasure-hunters and Stack had behaved so strangely. This started me wondering again why Rose and her father had followed close behind us for all those miles of the way out, after the shot at the lantern, without making their presence known to me. Stack had known, and had kept it from me. What was his game? Was he jealous? That goodnatured clodhopper? To the devil with his game!

But why had Rose Jeanbard kept herself hidden from me? Didn't she know I was her friend, and a friend to be trusted all the way? Well, she must know it now. I had proved it last night; and again I closed my eyes for a moment, the more easily to imagine her in my arms again. Just then Lion joined me. After jumping mightily against me once, as if he thought I needed arousing, he took the lead. I followed his lead. I had great faith in that big dog. If anyone could lead me to the pig, he would be the one. We changed direction and reached an edge of the forest at a point several hundred yards away from the spot toward which I had been casually heading. And there at the edge of the woodland we came upon the thing that Lion wanted to show me. It was not the pig.

It was the body of old Ruben Glashner. It lay on its back, its eyes staring blankly and its mouth frozen in a grimace of terror. Beside it lay a two-gallon can, empty but still smelling strongly of kerosene oil. A broken box of matches was held tight in the left hand, and in the right were gripped a dozen or more long, tawny hairs. I looked at Lion enquiringly, and he met my glance full-eyed and answered it with an affirmative gesture of the tail. He knew all about this. He had been in at the death. I stooped and looked closely at the dead man's leathery throat. It was unmarked; so I understood that the big dog had not been forced to use his teeth. Terror had put the swift finishing stroke to the thing which fever and exposure and strain had worn down to a mere mad flicker of life. I picked the tawny hairs from the grip of the stiff, hooked fingers.

We left the body on its back, with the oilcan beside it and the matches crushed in the right hand. I saw a glint of wheels on the road; and as we drew near the smoking shell of the old house I saw Amos Trim drive up in a light wagon. He was within a few yards of old Tom Deblore when he drew rein. He got down heavily, went forward slowly, then slowly but surely extended his hand. Tom accepted the hand. They stood talking, with an occasional gesture toward the smoking walls of the old house. When I came up, Trim turned to me and shook hands.

"I started the minute I heared about it from Stack Glashner," he said. "An' thar's more follerin'. Proud to meet you, Mr. Swayton. Trust we'll be good friends an' helpful neighbors."

"Go as far as you like," I replied. "Tom and I will meet you halfway, you may be sure; but if you had called sooner you would have been more hospitably entertained."

"It was a mansion of a house," returned Amos Trim. "It was built regardless of cost, of the best, by a high an' proud man —but a just man, so I've heared tell. But —but maybe thar's more gain nor loss in the loss of it. Thar'll never be sich another mansion on Wicklow Crick, I reckon, but yer new house won't cost you a red cent, Mr. Deblore."

"How's that?" asked Tom. "We are not paupers, the captain and I."

"That ain't the point. We've been in the wrong, the settlement an' the village, these ten years back an' more; as surely in the wrong as we was surely in the right before—before you yerself come home, Tom Deblore. It ain't a matter of money, nor of lumber an' carpentry, it's—it's —well, if it weren't that I'm a deacon, I'd say I'm damned if I can put a name to it!"

Tom's blistered face twisted into the lines of a painful but genuine smile.

"By the lord, Trim, you're human!" he exclaimed. We looked toward the road, attracted by sounds of wheels and hoofs. "And here come more of them, more humans," he continued. "Smiths and Watsons, men and women, and Stack Glashner back with our team. No, it's not a matter of money, I guess, nor of lumber and carpentry. There'll never be such another house on my ancestral acres as the old mansion, but if you folks like the new house better, I'll be satisfied. Go to it, Amos. I promise to live happily in the new house of Moosemeadows Park, whatever it looks like—but make it big enough for plenty of company."

The people brought baskets of food and rolls of bedding. They were embarrassed, men and women alike. They regarded the smoking husk of the old house with awe, whispering and pointing. But an elderly woman insisted on attending to Tom's face and hands and my hands. She slithered us with cold cream and bandaged us with more will than skill. That elderly woman, who was no beauty, affectionately tended the hurts which I had received while rescuing Rose Jeanbard from death. I thanked her, but there was bitterness in my heart. With the bitterness still in evidence, I walked over to Stack Glashner, who was arguing with another man about cement and lumber, and requested him to come with me. He came; and it seemed to me that there was a suggestion in his compliance of the air of a busy man humoring a fatherless child. I took him to the spot at the edge of the woods to which the big dog had guided me.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

He did not say. He looked at the oil-can, the matches, the crowded underbrush and innumerable big trees.

"What killed him?" he asked.

"That's exactly how I found him," I said. "He looks as if something had scared him to death."

Stack turned the body over.

"Look at that," he said, pointing.

There were unmistakable tooth-marks on the backs of the legs.

"That's where the dogs grabbed him to pull him out of the barn," I said. "So he sneaked over here, to use the last of his oil for setting the whole country on fire—but death overtook him before the match was struck. His third fire would have been his masterpiece. You recognize the oil-can, I suppose?"

I had once noticed it, or one just like it, in the doorway of the Jeanbard woodshed. Stack nodded.

"You and Lion and I are the only people who have seen this," I said.

Again Stack nodded thoughtfully. "I'll drag it in a ways now, out of sight, an' dig a hole tonight," he said. "No call for a funeral I reckon. No need for publicity, I guess."

XVI

WE LIVED in the barns while the men of the settlement and the village beyond, bossed by Deacon Amos Trim, built us a new house. At times there were as many as ten men at work, and at times as few as three. Stack Glashner hauled in a load of sawn lumber now and then, but he never remained for long. A new house was being built for the Jeanbards, too; and that was the job Stack worked on, I imagine. I did not see anything of the Jeanbards, but heard that Rose was visiting a friend in the village. I told Tom and the Bears of old Ruben Glashner's fate. To the rest of the people of the Wicklow Creek country it remains a mystery to this day.

Tom Deblore made a swift recovery from the shock of his losses. The proud house of his fathers, the old books, the family portraits, the fine old furniture, and most of the ancient silver were gone. On the other hand, the fear of his past was gone; and the suspicion and envy and hatred of the countryside were gone. But when Trim wanted to level the fire-scarred walls and chimneys with dynamite, the old man would not consider it for a moment.

"Let time finish it," he said. "Let nature level it."

The building of the new house slowed almost to a standstill during haying and dragged along into harvesting. But Deacon Trim, who had four stalwart sons at home, stuck to the job. There were days when the deacon had only Tom Deblore and Amy Bear to boss on the job, while Sol and I toiled with the ripe oats. Tom became an expert nailing on shingles.

I visited the Jeanbards three times, only to find, each time, that Rose was still in the village. Jules and Jacques were

'grateful. They were full of gratitude. They seemed still to be staggered and awed by the realization that, but for Tom Deblore and me, the grass would be sprouting on three Jeanbard graves by this time. Jules never mentioned to me any incident of that night on which he had shot at the lantern out on the hardhack, that night on which he and Rose and Stack and I had all been in the woods together. Nor did I mention it, nor the death and burial of old Ruben's confederate. I left that up to him, also, naturally supposing that Stack had told him as much as I had told Stack.

The new house of Moosemeadows Park was finished at last, and even Deacon Trim departed. We finished the harvesting of our grain, potatoes, and turnips, and the palms of my hands became as hard and stiff as the soles of my boots.

We saw nothing of Stack Glashner. I had time now to make another call on the Jeanbards, but no clothes fit to make it in. My kit had been burned; and the clothes in which I had worked through the two fires and the harvests of hay and grain and roots were by now but little more than the patches of divers colors and materials with which Amy Bear had mended them. I had written to a tailor in town, however; and Sol, who was so superior to the vanities of dress that he never knew what he had on, drove to the post office in the settlement to inquire for parcels for me.

It was a long drive, and Young Bill was the horse, and I had worn my patches patiently for weeks; but Sol could not have been more than a mile on his way before I began to look out impatiently for his return. I felt that a call on Rose Jeanbard today was absolutely necessary, and I pottered about the barns, for from there I could keep an eye on the road.

A horse and rig appeared, approaching at a country jog. It was a gray horse, and one of the Jeanbard horses was gray. I went out to the road to meet it. Presently I recognized the driver as Jules Jeanbard, slouched all by himself on the seat of the ramshackly Concord wagon.

"It's quite a spell since you was last to see us, so I come up to make sure ye're still alive," he said.

I wanted to unhitch and stable the gray, but he said that he could not stay for long enough to make it worth while. He asked kindly, almost tenderly, after Tom. He looked through the new house and admired it greatly. He spoke pleasantly to Amy Bear, who was churning, and said something nice about Sol. He walked around the walls of the old house in silence, pausing frequently to look through a blackened window-hole at the black ruin within.

"There was good Deblores in the old days," he said. "Gentlemen. An' then come a bad breed; an' at last there was one livin' devil from hell. But Tom's a gentleman, like the early ones. Leave the dead rest. But I'll say this for the worst of 'em, he wasn't a coward. Cowards, I can't abide 'em. And a coward's mostly always a sneak. What's become of that old Ruben, d'ye reckon?"

"I'm sure he is dead in the woods somewhere," I replied.

"An' not the only one?"

"I buried his confederate myself, with his help—the man who shot at me from ambush."

"What killed him?"

"Blood-poisoning, from a wound in his hand."

"But—what about the bullet-hole in his side?"

"There wasn't any bullet-hole in his side. He died of poisoning in a wound in his left hand that I gave him before I ever saw him. A chance shot. You only nicked the top of his shoulder."

Jeanbard looked dumbfounded, desperate.

"He is dead—so what matter who killed him," I said. "And he is safe underground, out of mischief, whoever he is."

"But—but Stack Glashner, he tells it different!"

"Stack Glashner? All he knows about it is what I told him. There was no wound except the old one in the left hand. The clean little nick on the shoulder wouldn't have killed a kitten. Now that you mention Stack, I remember telling him to tell you to make your conscience easy concerning the dead man, for I had killed him. I was feeling sore, for it seems that you hadn't the same trust in my friendship as in Stack's that night. Stack is a good fellow—honest and well-intentioned and all that sort of thing—but so am I."

Jeanbard groaned. Then he cursed. He sprang to his feet.

"Honest?" he cried. "A liar an' a sneak!" He pulled out his watch and looked at it. "Too late," he said in a flat voice, staring miserably at the watch. "I wouldn't stop to see it—my girl married to a Glashner—but it's done now! I had cause to hate one Deblore, an' I tried twice to kill 'im—but if all the Glashners that

was ever born had one neck among 'em I'd twist it quick as I'd spit on 'em!"

I got slowly to my feet. "Married?" I whispered. "Who's married?"

He did not answer immediately, but gazed helplessly around. At last he looked squarely at me, and there were tears in his eyes.

"A dirty sneak—an' a poor, scared, silly girl," he said.

I WANDERED about in the woods. So that was the way of it! I had thought Stack stupid and honest. Perhaps he had been. And see now what desire for a girl had done to his honesty! I had pitied him. Well, I still pitied him—but my self-pity was more poignant. Why had they not trusted me, been frank with me, those Jeanbards? And I had saved her life!—for this.

Sol came home with my new clothes, which I threw aside, unopened.

We awoke to a storm of wind and rain two mornings later. The rain eased up by noon, but the wind increased. It blew a gale and shoved in one of the fire-cracked walls of the old house. That seemed to satisfy the wind, for it veered a few points and slackened its pace to a crawl at sunset; but then the rain came on again, with thunder and lightning. We were startled from our sleep at two in the morning by an ear-splitting, earth-shaking crash.

"What's that?" I cried.

"Nothing but one of the old chimneys, I guess," replied Tom, from his room. I heard a grunt from the Bears' room.

I lay awake, listening. The rain had ceased; the thunder was only muttering now, rolling off; and the lightning flickered farther and fainter. I left my bed quietly, pulled on my patched garments, went down stairs noiselessly and there pulled on my boots and lit a lantern. Outside, I was joined by the dogs. As we approached the ruins of the old house I noticed the smell of soot on the clean, cool air. Three walls and one of the chimneys were down. I sat on a butt of broken wall and lit my pipe, and the dogs hunted about over and among the jumbled stones and bricks. They found something of evident interest to them; so I scrambled over to see what it was, lantern in hand. It was a dead raccoon, crushed to shapelessness. The poor little beast must have been in the old chimney when it was struck.

Then I spotted something else and held the lantern close to it. It was of about the size and shape of a football, but bumpy. It was mildewed. I pushed it with my foot and found it heavy and hard. It was

a sack, of leather or some such material. I picked it up and carried it to the house and set it and the lantern on the kitchen table. It was wound round and round at the neck with brass wire. I pried the wire off with a knife, and drew from the sack of cowhide a sack of oiled silk. The oiled silk was lined with birch bark. I pulled these away and found stout canvas. Each sack was tied individually at the neck. In the canvas sack I found a dozen or more packages of various shapes and sizes, each sewn up in soft Indian-tanned moose hide. Then a wild idea struck me.

"Come down here, Tom!" I shouted.

The old man came running, with Sol Bear close after him.

"What have you got there, Giddy?" he asked, staring.

"I don't know yet," I answered. "Something out of the chimney that came down—the same chimney that I once saw old Ruben crawl out of. I told him that he was wasting his time up that chimney."

Tom took up one of the packages and a knife with trembling hands. He ripped the soft leather and shook out onto the table a gold snuff-box studded with diamonds. He sat down heavily in the nearest chair.

"So it was true, after all," he whispered.

XVII

I HAVE written this in New York. Old Tom Deblore visits me here every winter and has a good time. The dogs and Sol and Amy Bear are well, Tom tells me. It is more than three years since I saw them. It is more than three years since I last saw Moosemeadows Park. I have not seen Rose Jeanbard since the night I carried her out, unconscious, through the fire and smoke of the burning house.

I am heir to the five thousand odd acres of Moosemeadows Park. I mean to go back and live on the old place some day—as soon, in fact, as I can close my eyes without imagining that I am still carrying that Jeanbard girl in my arms.

ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of "The Living Ghost of Sad Sam," "Cigarette Johnny," etc.

SAD SAM MORGAN, OF THE DOUBLE J RANCH, FOUND THE MOOSE RIVER A VERY WIDE ONE TO CROSS. AND OVER ON THAT OTHER BANK HE FOUND HIMSELF MIXED UP WITH DESPERADOES WHO SEEMED AS READY TO PUT A PAL OUT OF THE WAY AS AN ENEMY. ALSO HE FOUND THE GIRL WHO WROTE THE LETTER

SAD SAM MORGAN, gentle philosopher of the range land, jogged slowly along the top of the low bluff overlooking Moose River. Below him the river swirled madly in a muddy torrent augmented by innumerable spring freshets. As far as his eye could reach the hills were covered with a thousand shades of green glistening changeably under the rays of a kindly sun. As near an expression of perfect happiness and contentment as his melancholy visage would permit was upon his weatherbeaten, leathery face.

It had been a long, hard winter; followed by a cold and backward spring. It had been particularly hard on Sad Sam. During the first half of the winter, with the thermometer between ten to thirty degrees below zero, he had diligently ridden the high, snow-clad ridges gathering the range horses of the Double J. Many a time he did not get in until midnight, and daylight always found him leaving the ranch on his next ride. But, strenuous as these days had been, they were mild in comparison to the days of early spring.

Owing to a scarcity of hay, the Double J had been forced to cut out the strongest cattle and turn them on the range a full month earlier than usual, and Sad Sam, with two other riders, had been detailed to keep them there, a task that was well nigh impossible. There was no feed but the coarse and almost rotten grass of the year before that had grown up among the rocks on the south hill slopes, and the cattle were frantic to get back to the hay on the feed ground.

Then it had begun to storm. Cold, soaking rains, alternating with flurries of snow and sleet, were almost a daily occurrence. The riders started with four grain-fed horses each, quickly increased the number to six, and even that number, Sam contended, was not half enough. The three men rode from daylight until far into the night, and usually divided the remainder of the night into three shifts of guard duty.

Half-dazed by exposure and the lack of sleep they kept up the monotonous routine for thirty days, with little diversion for their minds except a continual wrangle as to who should do the cooking. Frequently they were all too tired at night to cook supper, and re-

tired without eating. This, as Sad Sam was wont to remark, "made little difference anyhow because supper an' breakfast generally come so close together that they had just as well be combined into one meal."

Sad Sam loved comfort and leisure very dearly; but, though his clothes were often soaked for days at a time and he was often hungry and always sleepy, it was characteristic of him that he never complained. To him it was all in the game. Better days were sure to come. And now they had arrived.

This day, for the first time in many weary months he rode in his shirtsleeves and basked in the warmth of the sun. He was mounted on Buck, one of his two favorite horses, and so was at peace with all the world.

Sam's hobby was horses, and, as his friend and fellow puncher, Cal Yearian, put it, "his hobby horse was Buck." The buckskin horse was an ex-outlaw and contest bucker, but now he was a far famed cow horse and horse runner. These two valuable qualities, however, were more or less nullified in the eyes of some by a rough, wracking gait, and a vicious and treacherous disposition, as well as a tendency to shy at every unfamiliar object.

This last would have been a harmless habit had it not been for his peculiar method of doing it. As it was, it was the thing that chiefly brought him into disrepute among the riders of the range. Most horses when they shied only snorted or leaped lightly aside for a moment, but Buck would drop until his body fairly swept the ground, and swap ends with the suddenness of a bolt of lightning. It was a trick he had learned in his contest bucking days, and he had never forgotten it. And he seldom permitted his rider to do so. It was a trick that had upset many an unwary rider. But Sad Sam, long accustomed to riding all manner of horses, was indifferent alike to jar and jolt, or any attempt to unload him that a horse might make.

The traits that Sam most admired in a horse Buck possessed in abundance. He was sure-footed as a goat, and had an amount of speed and endurance that few horses owned. With his natural vicious tendency to chase anything that would run he had long ago developed into a cow horse with no superior. And efficiency was the thing that Sad Sam most heartily admired.

It was now three o'clock, and Sad Sam was returning to camp some six or seven miles away, for his day's work was done —so he thought. Then, happening to glance across the river, he caught sight of a small bunch of cattle trailing parallel to the direction he was going. With the aid of his field glass he was able to make out the earmarks, and ascertained that they belonged to the Double J.

The cattle had no business being there. That side of the river was sheep range, or, more properly speaking, sheep trail. The only places on that side of the river where there was any feed was on the few homesteads that had recently been taken up along the river bottom, and these were watched and protected by the homesteaders. By morning the cattle would probably be twenty miles down the river.

Sad Sam cursed fluently in his usual soft, drawling voice, but he had no other idea than to get the cattle back across where they belonged if such a thing was possible. It was five miles back up the river to the nearest ford, and even that, he knew, was not safe with the present high water. Evidently the cattle had crossed before the warm weather had caused the river to boom, and had probably hung out in some absent homesteader's field until he had arrived and dogged them away.

He reflected that if he rode back to the ford to cross the river the cattle would be several miles farther downstream before he overtook them. Then he would have to drive them back to the ford and force them to cross, and after that he would still be twelve miles from camp. If he got home by midnight he would be lucky.

He looked at the river yearningly. He had crossed the stream right there when the water was low, and he was minded to try it now. If he could make it it would save him a lot of time and hard riding. He rode close to the bank and gazed at the river speculatively. The high banks were two hundred feet apart and filled with a rushing torrent of dirty, yellowish looking water. But though swift the water was comparatively smooth, and an old, washed out ford afforded an excellent place to hit the stream, and there was a place lower down on the other side where stock watered, and he was hopeful that he could get out there. He decided to try it.

Buck was a high swimmer, and by kneeling in the saddle Sam was able to keep even his feet dry as Buck waded into swimming water and struck out for the other side. But when no more than half way across it became evident to Sam that

they were going to land far below where he intended. To turn back now was impossible. They must go on and take their chances on getting out of the water over the straight bank.

Old Buck touched shore far below the place Sam had figured on, and fortunately he was able to touch bottom a few feet from the bank. He lunged to the top of the bank, but only succeeded in getting his fore feet upon it before the bank caved under his weight, and horse and rider went over backward into the river. Sam was underneath, but the depth of the water prevented him from being injured. He stuck to the saddle, and presently Old Buck again had his feet planted on the river bottom, though the swift current made him rock giddily.

It was some little time before Sam could again persuade his horse to attempt to climb the bank, but he was finally successful, and this time Buck managed to scramble out in safety. A moment later Sam cursed softly. Below him a bluff of rock presented an unscalable barrier, and above him a huge clump of willows almost entirely barred his progress. To get around the willows required him to ride for a distance of twenty feet along the treacherous edge of the river bank, and this old Buck was exceedingly reluctant to do. To plunge in and swim across was one thing; to fall in like a sack of salt was another. One such experience had been about enough for Buck.

As Sam tried to soothe and coax his trembling horse, and had just succeeded in getting him to start gingerly between the willows and the river he caught sight of a girl running swiftly toward him with a white envelope in her hand. Instinctively Sam realized that she was badly frightened, for she was glancing back over her shoulder continuously, as though expecting pursuit. But Buck was now well started, and all of Sam's attention was demanded by his horse.

Snorting with terror and trembling in every limb the horse moved forward, one slow step at a time. Once the water soaked bank caved beneath his hind feet, but with a cat-like spring he regained his balance and reached the edge of the thicket just as the white clad figure of the girl rounded the bush from the other side. Such an apparition was entirely too much for Buck's overstrained nerves. With a resounding snort of terror he dropped low and whirled backward, landing in the river ten feet from the bank.

The sudden rush of water between the horse's sides and Sam's wide, duck-wing chaps forced Sam's legs apart until, as he afterward expressed it, "they pointed at a quarter to three." He was washed from the saddle in an instant as Buck disappeared beneath the water. To save himself from Buck's madly churning hoofs he was forced to swim a few strokes toward the middle of the muddy torrent. The same moment Buck caught sight of him and obeying the impulse of self preservation at once attempted to climb upon his late rider's back. Once more Sam thrust under and came up still farther from the shore.

He came up blinded by the muddy water, thoroughly chilled and half-drowned. It was by sheer good luck that he managed to get a grasp of Buck's tail as the horse swam by him. He was too exhausted to attempt to climb back in the saddle, but was content merely to be towed to any place that it might suit old Buck to land. Evidently fright, or a determination to get back to his own side of the river lent strength to the swimming horse, for he regained the other side without difficulty.

Sam's first action was to wipe the water out of his eyes in order to glare back across the river at the girl whose precipitous appearance had caused him to narrowly escape drowning. He rarely lost his temper, but this was once when his philosophy failed him, and he meant to direct a few exceedingly caustic remarks to her.

His mouth opened, but no sound came forth. The girl was kneeling by the river bank in a posture of utmost supplication. As he looked she got to her feet and stretched out her arms appealingly. At the same time Sam noticed that she had pinned the white envelope just above the water line with a stick, and in such a manner that it would be invisible from every direction except from the river.

A moment later he saw a man carrying a rifle join the girl. The fellow seized her roughly and threw her aside. Then he began making gestures at Sam that were indubitably hostile. To make his meaning entirely clear that Sam was not welcome he raised his rifle and fired a shot over Sad Sam's head.

Puzzled and angry, his teeth chattering with the cold, Sam mounted old Buck and headed into a trail leading to the top of the bluff. He was unarmed, but that made little difference; he was shivering with the cold now to such an extent that accurate shooting was out of the question even if he had felt inclined to take up the challenge, which he did not. The man, he felt, must have had some reason for ordering him away, and he wanted to live long enough to find out what that reason was.

Halfway to the top of the bluff he looked back and saw that the man had disappeared. Actuated by curiosity to know whether the man had gone back to the shack that stood back some two hundred yards from the river or was still hiding in the brush, he turned his horse and started back down the trail. He had not gone a dozen feet before a rifle bullet thudded into the trail ahead of him. The fellow on the other side meant business. With a gesture of resignation Sam turned back and rode to the top of the bluff.

He had seen that the envelope was still where the girl had left it, and, what was of almost equal interest to Sam at the time, was that his brand new, thirty dollar beaver hat which he had lost in the river had floated in close to the bank and lodged against an overhanging clump of willows. It had taken two weeks of bitterly hard toil to earn that hat, and his bitterness against the homesteader increased.

He was too much impressed with the homesteader's earnestness to think of trying to do anything about the matter at the present time, but he had no intention of accepting his defeat as final.

"I'll git that hat, or the price of it out of that dry farm savage if I have to steal his milk cows to do it," he told his horse as he rode rapidly toward camp.

The whole thing had him puzzled. It was not like the usual run of homesteaders to act that way, though he had no acquaintance with the folks living there, the place having only been taken up the previous fall. And the girl had been unduly anxious to post a letter. Leaving it hidden under the bank was another poser.

A whimsical smile crossed his lean, melancholy visage as his lively imagination pictured the kidding he would be in for when the boys at camp learned how he had ignominiously fled from a despised homesteader, leaving his highly prized beaver behind. The high priced bonnet had already brought him a lot of good natured ridicule, and, now that he had lost it, the opportunity to make witty remarks would be a temptation that none of the boys would be able to resist. Not that he cared; anything that the boys might say would offer an opportunity for him to exercise his own gift of repartee—a thing he was never loath to do. Even as he rode into camp his mind was busy inventing clever come-backs. But if he welcomed the prospect of a clash of wits he was doomed to disappointment. Cal Yearian was the only man at camp, and Cal never kidded without an audience.

Cal heard Sam's story through without once interrupting. There was a look of bored amusement on his face. Sam was relieved that violent tempered Cal evinced no inclination to precipitate matters by premature action, as he had feared he would should Cal happen to believe his story.

"Did the beautiful heroine marry the noble hero an' live happy ever after?" Cal asked. "'Cause if she didn't it's a bum story."

Sam was somewhat taken aback. He had not anticipated his story not being believed. His ability to lie convincingly was a distinct talent, and he knew that Cal knew it. The humor of the situation appealed to him, and he could not resist the temptation to let a note of insincerity creep into his voice.

"What I've been tellin' you is the absolute truth, an' you won't believe it. That fact, without the evidence of my wet clothes an' missin' hat, ought to convince you. The feller that said truth was stranger than fiction sure had you in mind. Whenever I'm in doubt as to whether or not anybody is tellin' the truth, I just look at you. If you're takin' it in I know it's a damn lie, an' if you dispute it I know it's true."

"It's too bad yuh didn't have a coat an' a gun so's you could have shot a couple o' holes through the coat an' made the evidence conclusive," Cal mocked. "You see I've been washed off my horse in high water enough times to know how easy it can happen, an' a feller that ain't used to takin' a bath can easy git scared an' lose his hat."

"Well, I took a bath since you did," Sam retorted, and went into the tent to change his clothes. He knew there was nothing he could say that would convince Cal he was telling the truth if Cal's skepticism was really genuine—a thing he was inclined to doubt.

A little later he was cooking supper while Cal rode out to drive in the cavvy, ostensibly for the purpose of catching a night horse.

"Ketch old Sorghum for me," Sam called. "I'm goin' back after my hat." Sorghum was Sam's private saddle horse, and the top of the cavvy. This fact alone, he felt, should convince Cal that he was in earnest.

A little later he noted that Cal had caught for himself a powerful roan horse called Kid—the top of his string. That indicated that Cal might be intending to see him through the affair, but a look at Cal's face rather dispelled the idea. Cal was the kind of man who would see a friend through any trouble, but he was also the sort who hated above all things to be made the victim of a practical joke, and he evidently feared that Sad Sam was trying to perpetrate some sort of a hoax.

"What kind of an idee would it be for one of us to ride up to the ford an' come down from the other side while the other one swum across where I did an' pick up that envelope?" Sad Sam asked, by way of reopening the subject.

"That homesteader sure give you an' awful scare," Cal commented, "but if he shot at yuh twice without hittin' yuh, he can't be very dangerous."

"I don't think he was shootin' at me exactly," Sam started to explain, but Cal interrupted with, "Neither do I, an' I never did."

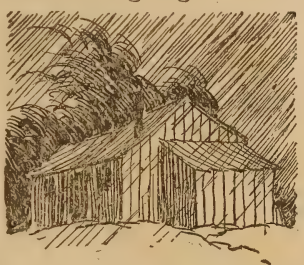
Sam felt his ire rising at Cal's stubbornness, but he knew he was paying the inevitable penalty of the practical joker. Cal simply did not intend to be victimized, and he would have to play his hand alone.

"Get this straight, Cal," he said mildly. "That hombre shot twice an' neither bullet came within ten feet of me. That makes me think he meant business. If he had been bluffin' he'd have tried to shoot close enough to give me a scare. He meant it for a warnin', an' that's the way I'm goin' t' take it."

"That's the way I'm goin' to take it, too," Cal mocked. "So if anybody drives up an' asks yuh, tell 'em I've gone to town." A few minutes later Cal mounted his horse and rode away toward town.

Darkness was beginning to fall when Sad Sam, minus his chaps, and wearing a pair of light shoes instead of his boots, and armed with a six-shooter and a belt full of cartridges, mounted old Sorghum and started for the river. He fully sensed that he might be embarking upon a perilous expedition. He was inclined to think that there had been just some trivial row between the girl and her father; he recalled now that he had heard that that particular homestead had been taken up by an old man with an only daughter. In that event the old man had probably shot toward him in a mere spirit of peevishness. But on the other hand the girl had not acted as though her trouble was a trivial one. And as far as he could judge the man who had shot at him was not old.

Anyway, swimming the river again after dark was going to be dangerous enough.



He had decided it was necessary. The homesteader's shack was built upon a sort of narrow promontory, and, to reach the place where he had last seen his hat and where the girl had left the letter, he would have to swim across there. If he went up to the ford and came down on the other side the only way he could reach the river at that point was to pass right by the shack, and that was too dangerous. The key to the whole business, he felt, was the letter. First of all he must obtain that.

It was pitch dark when he arrived at the place where he and Buck had taken their plunge that afternoon. He noted with some misgiving that the river had risen a foot higher than it had been a few hours before. It had looked formidable enough then, with the cheering rays of the afternoon sun to bolster up his courage. Now it was positively appalling. Furthermore, there was danger that the rising water had reached the envelope and washed it away. He had forgotten about his hat. Nevertheless he climbed off and swiftly undressed. Tying his clothes into a compact bundle he tied them securely to the saddle horn, and got gingerly back in the saddle.

He noticed several pieces of driftwood float close and disappear almost instantly in the darkness. With the discovery of this new danger came the realization that he was fast losing his nerve. He cursed

Cal for his stupidity in not believing his story. He did not care to have Cal attempt the dangerous crossing, but he felt horribly alone. If he must drown, he felt that it would be much easier if he had an audience.

To his great relief Sorghum took to the water without a moment's hesitation. Sad Sam emitted a choking gasp as the cold water struck him, but almost instantly he was submerged and it was not so bad. Unlike Buck, who swam high, keeping the saddle and a portion of his back above the water, Sorghum swum with only his head above the water. It was the knowledge of Sorghum's mode of swimming that had caused Sam to disrobe. By the time they were little more than halfway across Sam had lost all sense of direction, and once when Sorghum turned directly into the current to avoid a drifting log it seemed to Sam that they were rushing upstream at express train speed.

Presently, however, he felt old Sorghum's feet strike bottom, and a moment later the old sorrel clambered out on the bank a few rods below the willow bush that had caused Sam so much trouble before. Knowing that Sorghum could be depended upon to stay where he was, Sam dressed rapidly and then began to feel his way along the river bank.

Right above the water line he found the white envelope where the girl had left it. With a thrill he moved behind the large willow bush to study it more closely. Once sure that he was where he could not be observed from the shack, he struck a match. By its light he glanced about him before looking at the envelope. The first object he encountered was his beaver hat still hanging on the overhanging bush only a few feet away. He recovered it instantly and found it little the worse for the adventure. He laid it aside while he struck matches to study the letter, but he considered its recovery a good omen.

To his surprise the envelope bore no address whatever; nor was it even sealed. Under those circumstances he had no hesitation about reading the note that was in it. Holding the paper with one hand and striking matches with the other, he proceeded to read:

I am in terrible trouble. Father and I returned to the homestead today. I was driving the cows and father came on ahead to get the house ready. When I got here father had disappeared and these dreadful people were here. They won't tell me what's become of father. There's two men and two women, and another man is sick. They say he's drunk, but I believe he's wounded. I think they killed father, and maybe he wounded this man. They won't let me go any direction except toward the river, because they know I can't get away there. I got a chance to write this while they were all talking together. All I can hope for is that somebody will come along and get this some way before they kill me. I never saw such dreadful women.

Sam noted that the note had been written in a great hurry, and obviously under a great nervous strain.

"Poor kid, it's no wonder," he said pityingly.

Here was a situation far more critical than he had dreamed of. Murder had possibly been committed, and another one was liable to be perpetrated at any moment unless he, Sad Sam, intervened. It was a business not at all to his liking, but he must find out how things stood, and if the girl he had seen that afternoon was in danger he must get her out of it. He had no gallant nor romantic ideas about rescuing a damsel in distress. The job had simply fallen to his hand to do and he must attempt it to the best of his ability.

He thrust the letter into his pocket and advanced along the promontory toward the shack, keeping a line of bushes between himself and it the best he could. There was no light in the house and for a moment a cold fear struck him that he was too late. Then presently he saw a glow from one of three large, wall tents so cleverly concealed in the willows that even in daylight one might pass within fifty yards of them without becoming aware of their presence. But that also was a circumstance that favored Sam, as it permitted him to get close to the tent containing the light with little risk of discovery.

Silhouetted against the wall of the tent were the figures of four people; two of them obviously women. For a little while Sam watched their shadows, studying the gestures they made with curious interest. Then he moved toward one of the dark tents.

Within it he could hear the heavy breathing of a man in great pain. Slowly he lifted the side of the tent and looked in. He could just discern the man's head rolling monotonously from side to side, and he was murmuring in delirium. There was nothing to be learned here, and Sam withdrew. The other tent was unoccupied and he went inside to investigate. When he came out he understood many things.

The place was a sort of jungle honkatonk, such as he knew was frequently established along the much frequented sheep trails for the purpose of separating excitement-seeking shepherds, and others, from their hard earned coin. Such places, he knew, were utterly lawless.

He drew closer to the tent with the lamp in it and presently he was sure he recognized the angry voice of "Duke" Mitchell, a notorious tin-horn and bootlegger. Then, as though to settle any doubts he might have as to their identity the tent flap was thrown back, and a large, statuesque looking woman stood framed in the door of the tent. Instantly Sam recognized her as a well known lady of the range world called "Paradise Belle."

Sad Sam had barely time to slip behind a pile of camp luggage, and even then he was dangerously close to the path if the woman went out to one of the other tents. But she stopped as Duke Mitchell called out gruffly, "Come back in here, Belle. We've got to talk this thing over an' find out what we're goin' to do."

"Talk hell!" the woman snapped. "I've listened to enough talk—now it's time to do something." But she turned back into the tent, and Sad Sam seized the opportunity to dash over to the tent and kneel down close beside it where he could hear the excited voices within.

"If that damn dry farmer down to Blackfoot hadn't misdirected us, so that we thought this was his place, we'd have been all right," complained Mitchell.

"Well, we've heard you make that remark about a hundred times," snapped a woman, "but it don't change the fact that it was you said this was the place we were looking for."

"Quit hagglin' and do something," shrilly ordered Paradise Belle. You know what I think we ought to do."

"But it looks like a rotten trick, Belle, to drown Bud. He's our pal, an'——"

"He's dyin' anyway," retorted the woman, "but he'll drag it out till somebody comes along and then it'll be too late. If we leave him here, it'll be a dead giveaway. You're all willin' enough to drown the girl, so why get finicky about Bud. I don't see where he's any better than this girl here an' her old man."

"If we coulda drowned the old cuss without shootin' him, we could have said the girl fell in the river an' the old man drowned himself tryin' to save her," complained Mitchell.

"Don't forever be whinin' about what might have happened," Paradise Belle said angrily. "Tie some rocks to Bud and the girl's feet and send 'em to join the old man. There's no time to lose. Nine chances to ten that bird that you shot at this afternoon'll be pokin' around tomorrow to find out what's up. We want to be leavin' here by daylight."

Sad Sam felt his heart beating excitedly. He had been in some critical situations in his time, but never anything like this. He recognized instinctively that Paradise Belle was the dominant character in the tent and that sooner or later she would have her way. The girl's fate already seemed to have been agreed upon. He must do something and do it quick. But first of all he must find out where the girl was. From the way the people talked he did not believe that she was inside the tent with them, but he must make sure.

He noticed that the back wall of the tent was pressed rather tightly against the tent pole, and decided that by holding the canvas tightly against the pole he could cut through it with little risk of discovery. Getting a hold of the bottom of the tent with one hand he pulled down hard and thrust the keen point of his knife through the canvas and into the pole with the other. Then he cut slowly and silently downward for a distance of six inches. Through the opening thus made he was able to command a good view of the inside of the tent with little risk of discovery.

On a pile of bedding stretched along one side of the tent was the girl of the envelope, bound hand and foot. Her white face and wide, staring eyes gave evidence that she understood the fate that awaited her, and, although she struggled helplessly against her bonds from time to time, she made no outcry. With relief and admiration Sam recognized that she was not the fainting kind.

But how to get her out was a problem that taxed his ingenuity. As far as Sam was personally concerned he would have been willing to have thrown the tent flap aside, stepped in and shot it out with them. For the first time in his life he was

filled with a real, killing rage. But this plan he knew would do only as a last resort. There were two armed, desperate men inside, and the odds were heavy that the women as well were armed, and certainly they would not hesitate to fight. If one of them happened to kill or wound him seriously, the girl's last chance would be gone.

It was sheer folly to think of slashing a hole in the side of the tent close to the girl, and trying to get her out that way, but for a moment he entertained it. Then it occurred to him that his chances of getting away with this would be enhanced if he first shot out the light. But this idea also he cast aside, for the reason that he knew he could not get a rod from the tent with the girl before they would be after him, and at that distance some of their bullets would find the mark.

For a moment he wished that he had taken the time to go up to the ford so his horse would have been in a better location, but a moment later he was glad he had not as he heard Mitchell remark, "All right, Belle, we'll drown the girl, an' then fix Bud."

He knew then that he must try to get the girl, make a race for his horse in the darkness and trust to old Sorghum to get them back across the river with the double weight. Then an inspiration came to him, and he knew what was the best thing to do.

Stepping to the side of the tent where the girl lay, he quietly cut the loops where the tent was pinned to the ground, then went on around to the door. Suddenly grasping the pole that supported the end of the ridge pole he gave it a sudden lift and jerked it away. The tent collapsed like a punctured balloon, and the lamp was extinguished as it fell.

Sam heard the screams of the two women and the curses of the two men as they squirmed about in the folds of the stout canvas, but he had no attention to pay to them. Like a flash he ducked to the side of the tent, raised the canvas expertly and drew the bound girl outside.

"I'm the guy you tried t' give the letter to this afternoon," he whispered to the girl in explanation as he deftly cut the cords that bound her wrists and ankles. He stood her on her feet, but she took only one step, and then collapsed.

"My—my legs are numb," she whispered.

Sad Sam picked her up and raced toward the river awkwardly. He had not gone far when his foot caught in a willow root and he fell sprawling. The same moment he heard the dull roar of a shotgun. In falling he had instinctively thrown up his right hand to grasp at a bush, and a sharp pain in his wrist told him he had been hit.

He was up instantly, half dragging, half carrying the girl under his left arm. Though a strong man, Sad Sam was notoriously awkward on his feet, and now, handicapped by the weight of the girl, his progress was most unsatisfactory, especially so since the others now seemed to have fought clear of the tent, and bullets were stabbing into the darkness all around.

"If you'll put me down, now, I think I can walk," the girl said, and Sam was glad to let her have the chance though he still supported her by an arm around her waist.

"Cover the promontory, an' drive 'em into the river!" Duke Mitchell roared.

Sam's last hope of getting on his horse and making a dash back past the shack and the tents was now dispelled. The river, dark and treacherous as it was, was now their only chance.

By the time they reached old Sorghum the girl seemed to have recovered the use of her legs and she was making Sam hurry to keep up with her. She was able to climb into the saddle unassisted. Again Sam heaved a sigh of relief as he noted that she was an expert horse-woman.

With his right arm dangling uselessly at his side, Sam rather awkwardly mounted behind the girl and assisted her to urge old Sorghum into the river.

"Hang on for dear life, girl," he urged. But a little later he realized that the double weight was too much for old Sorghum. They were being swept rapidly downstream at a pace that he knew would carry them into the rapids long before they reached the shore. In that event they were lost.

Grasping the saddle strings firmly with his uninjured hand he slipped into the water and was towed along, though he struggled on, swimming with his legs in order to ease his horse's burden as much as possible. Old Sorghum seemed to realize the desperateness of their situation perfectly and was battling with the current with terrific energy, but the handicap was

too much for the noble old horse, and they were still forty feet distant from the shore when Sam felt the tug of the rapids and knew that they would never be able to make it.

He started to loosen his grip on the saddle strings with the hope that the horse and the girl might make it, when suddenly he realized that by some miracle he was being rushed toward the shore so rapidly that he could not keep his head above water. He struck the bank with such a jar that the saddle strings broke, leaving him lying half in, half out of the water.

For some minutes he was unable to move. Then he sat up just as two people approached. They seized him by the shoulders and dragged him on to dry land. One of them was the girl; the other was Cal Yearian.

"You damn yap!" Sad Sam snarled at Cal. "If you'd a believed me in the first place an' been here to——"

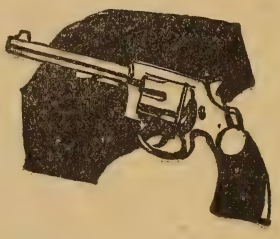
"I did partly believe yuh, an', if I didn't altogether, it was because of yore misguided sense of humor that makes yuh proud o' yore reputation as a successful liar," Cal retorted. "I determined from the first to sort of trail along an' see what happened, an' I reckon it's lucky I did. I got here just as the shootin' started, an' by keepin' on a line with the directions of the gun flashes I saw where yuh took to the water, so I come down here to the head of the rapids, figgerin' that if yuh landed above you wouldn't need me, but if yuh couldn't make it this would be the best place to haul yuh out, an' I reckon I guessed right. I hurled fifty feet of twine with just a little bit of a loop from right over the edge of the water, an' at that I just did have rope enough to get my dallies."

Sad Sam got slowly to his feet just in time to see the girl impulsively throw her arms around Cal's neck and kiss him. "I—we—owe you our lives," she faltered.

"Yeah, if I hadn't got shot in the wrist, Cal, I'd shake hands with you myself," Sam stated. Then he turned to the girl.

"If you ever need a friend, sister, just call on Sad Sam. But if the job's too big for me send for Cal here—he'll do anything you can git him to."

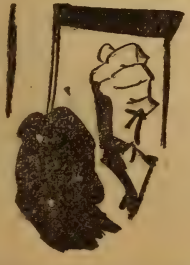
In the Next Issue



A complete novel wherein our old friend, Cultus Collins goes into action

by **George Allan England**

Strong Men and Meat



Sealers cut off from their ship on the Arctic floes; peril, struggle and hatred.

Straight Shooting

by **W. C. Tuttle**

THE EYE OF THE FOOL

By FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "Mon Ping's Treasure," "The Yellow God," etc.

NOTHING EVER HAPPENED IN THIS PART OF THE SOUTH SEAS, SAID SAMMIS. THEN IT WAS RUMORED THAT MARVIN, THE ROBBER, WAS AROUND, AND VARIOUS PEOPLE TOOK TO BEING DETECTIVES

"LOOKS like you've been having some exciting times around here," said Captain Barrons as he entered the common room of the Hotel Penang in the "fifty-house-port" of Timor-Verlaten about an hour after daylight.

Sammis, the assistant manager of the place stood in the doorway gazing at the scene of disorder in the common room. He was still in his pajamas and slippers, and his damp hair stuck up on his head. He was a young man, thin-faced, affable, but with an expression about his mouth that revealed an inward and perpetual disappointment with the world.

"Hello, skipper! Excitement! No, never! Nothin' ever happens here, and when it does, it don't amount to anything. I wish I was back in the American army!" He gave a snort of disgust and waved his hands at the litter of playing cards, tables with empty bottles and glasses, newspapers strewn about on the floor, and chairs on their backs, with here and there a table on its side.

"But something happened," persisted the skipper, as he took off his straw hat and fanned himself. His white shore-going suit was spotlessly clean, and pressed to razor edges. "Guess you had a gay night here last night, eh?"

"It looks worse in the morning sun than I thought it would last night," went on Sammis. "I give orders to the Chinks to police up the place before they went to bed. Did they do it? Take one look at the joint, and Echo answers *No!* They jumped out at daylight, and most likely they're down in Ko Mun's place, hittin' the pipe! But never mind my troubles. I ain't seen you since the big wind, skipper. You bring a cargo for the plantation?" He looked out on the placid bay and saw the *Malacca Mail,* Barron's schooner, at anchor just inside the reef.

"No cargo—in or out," said Barron. "I just come ashore for an hour or so to have a gab and a loaf. And if it don't put no strain on your establishment, I'll take a pair of eggs and a bowl of coffee."

"Can do!" pronounced Sammis. "If no can do, I'll scalp some of them cookhouse boys to their ears."

"You must have the place full," said Barron, looking round the room.

Sammis turned around and stared at him. "Place full!" he snorted. "Say, this mess was wished on me by a gang of passengers off the steamer *Japara* last night—all night. Two nights they been here! Look at me! I ain't had a bit of sleep for two nights, and just grabbed a little shut-eye before daylight, when the *Japara* sailed."

"I saw her headin' out as I was comin'

through the north break in the reef," said Barron. "So that's it, eh? But what'd she stay here two nights for? Them Dutch boats don't loaf around so much, ordinary."

"Not ordinary, no," agreed Sammis. "But she busted some gadgetts. Steerin'-gear, I guess. I was too busy feedin' and drinkin' the passengers to find out. And you can leave it to me, skipper, they kept me humpin'!"

"And all cleared out now," said Barron. His eyes fell upon a yellowish raincoat, an old coat streaked with sea-water, hanging on the wall between *kajangs,* or glassless windows. "But you've got somebody here. Or is that coat yours?"

"Oh, that's the wardrobe of a chap who's been here about a week. And one man stayed off the *Japara*—said he'd wait and catch some other boat."

"Are they Dutch?"

"No, just ordinary planters or traders or machinery-men. They don't talk much, and don't mix. The one that's been here a week—Mr. Haswell, him that owns the coat—has got some business over at the plantation, but he ain't been there yet, far's I know. Strikes me he's too lazy to move. Just loafs around and asks questions, and tries to make up his mind where he'll go from here. But he don't talk to nobody, just mooches around by himself; and when he sees the other roomer—that's Mr. Rawlins—he just snoops away."

"Rawlins stuck here from the *Japara?*"

"Yes, he was a passenger. But he didn't mix with this gang of wreckers I had below here all night. He's another one of these lonesome birds, except when I'm around. Then he keeps askin' me when the next boat's comin', and where she'll be bound for, and what's the fare, and so on. You'd think I was a walkin' time-table for every packet in these waters."

"Nobody else in this place he could ask," grinned Barron.

"No, but he could know where he's goin', before he begins to ask questions. Oh, he's a nice enough man, but just a gabber. Of course, in the hotel business we got to give information, if we've got it. But we don't know the price of mosquito nets at the North Pole." He suddenly thought of something that had been neglected, and made a dash for the rattan door behind the bar. "Them eggs!" he exclaimed, as he disappeared.

Captain Barron remained in his sprawling attitude, content to wait for his breakfast. Through the open door to the front veranda he had a view of the bay and of his schooner in the blue, still water inside the reef and of the reef itself, further out—a streak of white spume running athwart the wide bay that made the port of Timor-Verlaten.

The bay itself, seen across the zone of shade of the outside veranda, opened to Captain Barron like a stage seen beyond footlights—a stage smeared with color, flooded with lights, and framed with green foliage which flanked each side of the sandy stretch before the hotel.

The boat which had brought Barron ashore was returning to the schooner. He could hear the merry chatter of his native sailors as they rowed.

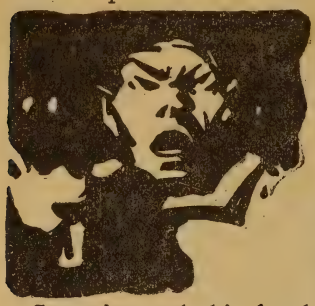
All the *kajangs* were open on the front and sides of the hotel. The sun streamed in. The morning was without a flaw. There was no breeze, and the air sparkled in the bright sunlight. The blueness of the enclosed bay suggested paint rather than water, and the schooner, mirrored double, looked more like a toy than an actual vessel. Now and then brown figures moved across its decks mechanically, and a pale ribbon of blue smoke rose from the galley stove pipe.

"I'll just rest myself a couple of hours, give the crew a chance to get some fruit and fish a little, and pole back aboard," mused Barron.

He was glad the place was quiet, but he took his surroundings for granted. He knew a hundred island ports like Timor-Verlaten. He was not looking for scenery. He thought he might find it more enjoyable to have somebody to gossip with in addition to Sammis. Having only a native mate aboard the *Malacca* Mail, the skipper always sought companionship ashore, and liked to sit about and hear traders and travelers in conversation. More than once, by this method of loafing and listening, he had picked up slight shreds of information which enabled him to get a cargo, or now and then turn a pretty penny by carrying a passenger who wanted to get out of a little port before the regular boat was due.

He heard the scolding voice of Sammis from the back of the house. "Two eggs, cook him flat, quick and good, or maybe I break your neck in four places!" and then the crash of an overturned bunk and the

shrill squealing of a Chinese boy as he was dumped out on the floor.



At once there was the rattle of stove-covers and the crackling of a fire being nourished with coconut coir, bamboo ends and bits of rubbish.

Sammis stuck his head in through the door behind the bar and announced calmly, "You'll have your chow, skipper, in a minute. If it don't come, sing out to me."

"I'll wait and see what happens, and if it don't, I'll make a squawk," said Barron, and settled himself in his chair with a tattered newspaper salvaged from the floor to help him kill the time.

II

BUT Captain Barron found he had little time to wait alone. Just as Sammis disappeared, the skipper heard a creaking on the stairs behind the partition which shut off the common room from the little entry off the front veranda.

Whoever it was that came down the stairs, the person seemed to be careful about showing himself, for he remained behind the casing of the door before entering the room. Barron felt that somebody was listening and peering into the room with caution.

The skipper turned his head. At once a man stepped from behind the partition, a man wearing a gray Japanese kimono which flopped about his bare ankles. In one hand he carried shaving gear, and in the other a toothbrush and a tube of paste. As the bright morning sunlight struck across the face of the stranger, Barron noticed that the man looked haggard and worn. Obviously, the passengers of the steamer *Japara,* making merry during the night, had kept the guest of the hotel awake.

"Oh, hello there!" said the stranger, with a nod. "I didn't know there was anybody here! Tried to sleep this morning, after the confounded racket all night! But with Sammis killing a cookboy, there's no place where a man can catch a nap."

Under the stubble of dark beard, his cheeks were heavily tanned. He had the beginning of a black mustache on his lip, dark eyes that carried a look of infinite shrewdness, or maybe the strong light hurt them, for he shaded them against the sun with the back of his hand as he talked.

"Sammis stirred things up," observed Barron. "I can hear my eggs cooking outside."

The stranger still hesitated, doubtfully. "You didn't sail with the *Japara,*" he remarked.

"Not in her," said Barron. "Just got here myself. That's my schooner in the bay."

The other moved forward a few steps, and looked out through an open *kajang.* "Oh, I see! So that's your schooner, is it? Where you bound for?"

"Billiton Island, for block tin."

"Thought at first you were one of the passengers from the *Japara.* Now, if you're going Java-way, I might want to go along. But Billiton—that's the wrong way for me."

"Not for Java, this trip," said the skipper.

The man in the kimono slapped his sandals along the floor, on his way to the side veranda where there was a table with water, and a mirror for shaving. As he came abreast of the raincoat hanging on the wall, he stopped abruptly, and studied it an instant, doubtfully. "Is that your coat?" he asked, turning to Barron.

The skipper shook his head.

"I asked," said the other, "because I've a coat like it myself, but I was sure I didn't leave it down here." The stranger yawned openly, tapping his face with the back of a hand. "Seems to me," he said, "I've met you before somewhere, Captain. My name's Rawlins—George C. Rawlins, and I'm from Batavia."

Barron looked at him casually. "I guess you got me," he said pleasantly. "Maybe you've seen *me,* but I don't remember you."

"That may be it," said Rawlins, and without further comment, he pushed on to the side veranda, and Barron heard him spilling water into a basin from a tin pitcher.

In a few minutes the stairs creaked again, and another man appeared in the doorway of the entry. This man was fully dressed in white, and wore a big sun helmet. He entered briskly, his freshly whited shoes giving off tiny puffs of powdery "blanco" as they struck the floor. Captain Barron saw at once that the newcomer had every sign of being a man thoroughly at home in the islands. He had freckled hands, a tan over a natural ruddiness, wrinkles about his pale blue eyes,

and a heedlessness of his surroundings. He showed no interest in the place, and at once gave the skipper a friendly nod, recognizing in him, apparently, a man who was an old-timer among the white men living in the tropics.

"Must be time for breakfast," he remarked, turning his head for an instant to listen in the direction of the cookhouse.

"My chow is on the way," said Barron. He noted that the other was already shaven, and appeared as fresh as if he had found no difficulty in sleeping through the night in disregard of the merry-making passengers below him. Also, Barron observed without giving any thought to the matter, that Rawlins, who had been shaving in sight through the open door to the side veranda, drew away and was no longer visible. Besides, Rawlins, who had been humming a little tune, became silent.

The newcomer dropped into a chair, took off his helmet and plucked from under the inner band a folded paper, which he studied for a minute. His hair was sparse and of that pale, reddish hue best described as "sandy." It occurred to Barron that this man might be Scotch.

"Hello!" he exclaimed suddenly. "There's a schooner in!" He craned his neck to get a better view through the *kajang*.

"Mine, sir," said Barron.

With a lift of his eyebrows, as if surprised, the stranger took a closer look at Barron. "Where are you from, if you'll pardon the question?"

"Zamboanga."

"Oh!" He looked about him hastily, as if making sure there was no other person in the room. Then he clapped his helmet back on his head, got up abruptly and stepped to the raincoat hanging from the peg, and took a paper from the inside pocket. As his hand was reached forward to the coat, Barron noticed a wart on the back of the thumb of the right hand.

"I don't believe I'll wait for breakfast," remarked the stranger, talking more to himself than to Barron. "I'll go over to the plantation before the heat sets in, and stretch my legs a bit." With a nod of his head to the skipper, he moved briskly out to the front veranda. Before he went to the ground, he stopped and listened, and glanced suspiciously in the direction of the side veranda. He seemed to be aware that Rawlins was out there—and in hiding.

Then, almost as if in sudden panic, the man slipped down the stoop and, stepping to one side of the broken coral in the path so as to avoid the crunching sound made by shoes, hurried away for the beach in the yielding sand.

"He's certainly in a hurry to get away," mused Barron. "And he seemed kind of upset to find my schooner in the bay. Something sure gave him a bad turn."

III

IN A couple of minutes Sammis appeared, now all in white himself, and wearing a bar jacket.

"Seen them eggs yet?" he demanded.

"No, but never mind the eggs," said Barron. "Who is that chap? See him? Scuttling along the beach for the plantation?"

Sammis looked through a *kajang*. "Oh, Haswell," he replied. "That's the bird who's been here a week, and has most of his chow in his room, private. Come ashore from a tradin' schooner. Just moons around by himself."

"I'll say he's a flighty customer," said Barron. "Came in here and made a remark about wanting his breakfast, or something like that, and when he saw my schooner in the bay, he jumped up and dug out like somebody had called him to go and foreclose a mortgage."

"I ain't surprised," said Sammis. "That's the way he is all the time—jump and run. Just hates strangers around, and went to his room and kept out of sight while the *Japara* crowd was here. Say, I don't believe he spoke to one of 'em!"

"He seems afraid," said Barron. He looked round to the side door, expecting that Rawlins would be looking in and listening. But Rawlins was still out of sight—and silent.

"You know I got a hunch on this bird Haswell," said Sammis, with a mysterious air. "I believe he's on the still hunt for Marvin, the train robber."

"Marvin! The train robber!" exclaimed Barron, all interest at once. "Why, what're you talking about? This is the first time I heard of a robbery!"

"Gee!" said Sammis. "Ain't you heard *that?* Why, the government sent word to

be on the lookout for suspicious characters. But, dang it all, the government don't know what this Marvin looks like! Not even the smallest mark to go by. Just keep an eye out for suspicious characters, was what I got. Now, I ask you, what's a suspicious character?"

"But who is Marvin?"

"Nobody knows who Marvin is, or what he looks like. Held up the Dagupan mail train and got a lot of registered letters with money and checks and so on in 'em. Got over to Lingayen Gulf and held up a schooner, and dusted away with the skipper, the crew, and the ship's cat. Nobody knows what become of the schooner or the crew—Marvin just naturally killed 'em off and burned the schooner. But they say that before he done that he got into these waters and is loose in some of the islands. Anyhow, he just went straight up into the air after he grabbed that schooner, and so did the police."

"But how did they know he got the schooner?"

"One of the crew got away while the fight was goin' on. He didn't see Marvin, but the police knew what happened, when they come to study it out. Marvin just plugged a couple of the crew, made the skipper get out to sea with a fine breeze, and that was the last of him. It was Cap'n Crockett of the *Arcturus*. I guess you knew him?"

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Barron. "And they don't even know what Marvin looks like?"

"Nobody ever got a glimpse of him," said Sammis. "The poor hombre of a sailor who got away, he was scared so stiff they had to pry him apart to make him talk. And I'll bet—" he lowered his voice to a confidential note—" that this Haswell, he's on the lookout for Marvin. I don't blame Haswell much—there's a big reward offered—government, banks, and so on, and it all piles up to ten or twenty thousand dollars. Me, if I was to grab this Marvin, I tell you, skipper, same boat that brought me here would bring me back. Oh baby! Think of it! Chris Sammis at the movies every night in 'Frisco, dressed up swell, with ten or twenty thousand in my jeans!"

"Would you dare pull a gun on him?" asked Barron, with a grin.

"Me! Pull a gun on a reward like that! Sure! Wasn't I in the army? Couldn't I shoot—well, pretty good? Good enough to wing this bird, I'll tell the world! Besides, the reward is good for dead or alive. Me for it, skipper!" He made for the door to the cook-house, a belligerent look in his eyes.

"I don't think they'll catch him, if that's all they know about him," agreed Barron, as Sammis disappeared.

Rawlins came in through the *kajang* from the veranda, wiping his hands on a towel.

"What was that Sammis was talking about just now?" he asked.

"Oh, this Marvin, the train robber," said Barron. "I guess you've heard about it."

"Yes, the *Japara* was buzzing with it," said Rawlins. He grinned. "And Sammis he's turned detective since he heard of the reward. I wouldn't be surprised if he went through my baggage, looking for clues."

Barron laughed. "Yes, the chap's all lit up about it."

"I thought somebody else was in here a minute back," went on Rawlins. "Before Sammis, that is. I heard some other voice, if I'm not mistaken."

"That chap named Haswell," explained Barron. "Owns the raincoat, there."

"Oh, Haswell. Did he go up stairs again?"

"No, he dug out when he saw my

schooner. Said something about going to the plantation. The minute he saw my boat, he got a bit flustered, and just bolted down the beach. Didn't want to wait for breakfast when he knew I was in. It was the way he acted that made Sammis suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?" asked Rawlins, in surprise.

"Of Haswell—got it into his head that the chap's on the lookout for Marvin, the train robber."

"Oh, ho!" said Rawlins, his eyes opening wider. "I see! Detective, maybe. That's why he's been so cagey. Now that you mention it, he *is* a queer customer. Been around here while the *Japara* was in for her repairs, and avoided everybody. He did say something to Sammis about having an appointment at the plantation—and he's a stranger in the place, too. Funny thing! He was to sail in the *Japara* this morning—I heard him book his passage, and I thought he was gone. But at the last minute he changed his mind, I'd say, and stayed on here."

"Odd fish, anyway," said Barron.

"Looks that way," said Rawlins, and turning suddenly, went to the veranda and

gathered up his gear, came in and disappeared up the stairs.

The Chinese boy came in with a tray laid out with Barron's breakfast. The skipper aproned his shirtfront with a napkin, and fell to his meal.

But it seemed to Captain Barron that he had been mistaken about Rawlins going up the stairs. For now Rawlins put his head around the partition and said to the Chinese servant, "Boy, you catch me the same number chow." Then he could be heard going up the stairs, and presently he was whistling softly in an upper room—that peculiar whistling which some persons indulge in when they are preoccupied with a problem aside from what they are doing.

"Now, that's funny!" Captain Barron told himself as he sipped his coffee. "I always seem to hear that man come and go *twice!* Did he go up the stairs the first time, or am I going balmy? He never seems to be where he should be, by the noise the floor makes. When he's *gone,* he ain't gone, and when he's *here,* he is most likely somewhere else! Kind of a fool jumping-jack, that man Rawlins."

In a few minutes the Chinese boy was back with a tray with a duplicate of Barron's breakfast. He left it on a table and returned to the cookhouse. Immediately after, Barron heard the stairs creaking and, thinking it was Rawlins, sung out, "Come on—your breakfast is here, quick shot!"

A man entered, but it was not Rawlins. The newcomer, though, was about the build of Rawlins and appeared to be unsteady on his feet. He stood against the casing and stared at the skipper.

"Funny!" thought Barron. "Sammis said there were two white men in the hotel, and here's a third. What's Sammis holding out on me, anyway?"

IV

THE stranger remained leaning against the door casing, squinting into the room at Barron. The strong light seemed to give this man great discomfort, for he twisted his face and shook his head wearily. His hair was wet, but unbrushed. One dirty shoe was unlaced and the strings trailed on the flooring. He wore no coat, but a silk shirt open at the collar, without a tie. His duck trousers were clean but baggy about the knees and full of creases—as if he had been sleeping in his clothes.

"What's—where the gang gone?" he asked croakingly.

"Just what gang do you mean?" countered Barron.

The other winced and shook his head. It appeared to be hurting him in some mysterious way.

"They're all in bed—squiffy," he mumbled. "Well, I'm glad I ain't the only one." He studied Barron with a wavering eye, and seemed disgruntled to find him there alone.

"You must be looking for somebody," suggested Barron.

"I don't want to see 'em," retorted the man. "Lot of gin-blotters! I don't want to see anybody!"

"Oh, all right," said Barron. "You don't have to look at me."

"Don't mind me," said the man. "I'm cross. I've been squiffy—started early last night. I'd been all right, but I mixed the stuff. Went up stairs to have a nap. And now I've got to hurry aboard the *Japara.*"

"Then you've got some hurry on your hands," said Barron. "The *Japara* sailed at daylight."

"Sailed!" He made a dive for a *kajang,* brought up heavily, and stared out at the bay, searching the water for the steamer.

"Gone!" he moaned, and spun round and dropped into a chair. He glared at Barron.

"Say! Why didn't you call me?"

"I was too busy," grinned Barron. "I was making my landfall about that time."

The man puzzled over that, and then waved a hand in dismissal. "You're squiffy yourself," he declared, and then, his wavering eyes lighting upon the breakfast before him, he picked up the knife and fork and began to eat.

"That breakfast belongs to Mr. Rawlins," said Barron.

"Who's Mr. Rawlins?" demanded the other. Then, without waiting for an answer, he went on, "My name's Gill—but that ain't no reason why you should make jokes about my being a fish! No, sir! I've had enough of that kind of stuff. I can't help it if my name's Gill — now, can I?"

"You live up to it, when it comes to gin, I'll venture to say," said Barron, grinning.

"You'll venture to say!" snorted Gill.

"Venture your head off. The *Japara* sailed, and all my money in the pursers safe! That gang of drunks! Never called me!" He grabbed up the cup of coffee and threw it into his throat with a backward toss of his head that reminded Barron of a porpoise rising to a baited hook.

"Maybe they didn't know you sneaked up stairs for a sleep," said Barron.

Gill turned and glared at him, as if the skipper were to blame for all the troubles of the morning.

"Boy!" yelled Gill. "Fetch me a slug of gin and bitters, and look sharp!" But as there was no boy in sight, the order probably never was heard.

Barron resumed his breakfast, and Gill ate sadly. In a minute Rawlins came down the stairs. He was fully dressed now in clean white duck. He paused at the foot of the stairs and looked through the door hesitatingly, as if reluctant to enter. He peered at Gill doubtfully—also, Barron thought, a trifle suspiciously.

Barron winked and grinned. Gill went on eating without looking up from his plate. Rawlins shook his head disgustedly, as if he had no desire to listen to the silly talk of a man still half drunk. He stole up the stairs again.

Gill, with a muttered complaint about his head, left the breakfast table and wandered out to the front veranda. He fell into a deck chair with a groan, and in a minute was gently snoring.

Again Captain Barron was startled by Rawlins; for Rawlins appeared at once from behind the door-casing. If he had gone up the stairs—and Barron heard him go—Rawlins had come down quietly. It seemed to be one of his favorite maneuvers, this trick of creaking the stairs on his way up, and then coming down secretly to listen.

"That chap must be one of the *Japara* crowd," said Rawlins in a low tone, as he drew near Barron. "Confounded nuisance! And he messed up my breakfast! Good thing he's gone to sleep, or he'd talk us to death!"

He sat down at a table which gave him a view of Gill's sprawling feet through the open *kajang*. He beckoned the skipper to him with a mysterious wink. Barron crossed to the table and sat down opposite Rawlins, leaning forward to hear what Rawlins had to say.

"Know anything about this chap outside?" whispered Rawlins.

Barron shook his head.

"He was aboard the *Japara*. Annoyed everybody to death, with his gabble. Broke into every conversation, sat and watched card games and told players how to play their cards; asked questions until he was a pest. And talked about this Marvin, the train robber, until we were all worn out. My chief reason for stopping off here was to get away from this Gill—and now it looks as if he sneaked up stairs during the night and hid so as to have an excuse to stay behind when the steamer sailed."

"He just got lit, I presume," said Barron.

Rawlins had a knowing look in his eye. "Not so lit as he makes out to be," he declared. "It's an even bet that he has been lit. But I'm sure there's more to his staying behind than just accident."

"How do you mean?" asked the startled Barron.

"I don't just know myself." He paused and listened, to make sure Gill was still snoring. "I'll find out, before long. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if—he isn't Marvin."

Barron opened his mouth in amazement.

"Only thing about that," went on Rawlins, "is that this chap Gill doesn't fit the description."

"Description!" gasped Barron. "But Sammis said there was no descriptions for Marvin."

Rawlins winked significantly. "Sammis doesn't know everything. I've got a friend who has a friend in the secret service—that's as far as I want to go—who has an inside tip on enough description to catch Marvin. But the authorities are keeping it in the dark so Marvin won't be afraid to move around. If he knew just how much the police know, he'd disguise himself, and keep under cover. As long as he thinks they haven't any description, he's bolder. And, also, the police don't intend to let some stranger pick up that whacking big reward."

"I see," said Barron. "Then you've got this description."

"I got a few pointers from my friend," admitted Rawlins. "It's inside stuff."

"And you know it isn't Gill."

"Can't be sure. He may have dyed his hair."

"How's that?"

"Gill has black hair."

"What color hair has Marvin, if you don't mind? But, perhaps you want to keep that to yourself."

"Oh, that's nothing much to keep secret," said Rawlins. "These islands are full of—sandy haired men."

"Eh?" Barron was interested at once.

"Yes. Marvin has sandy hair. But every sandy haired man I've seen lately is known to friends. That's the trouble—Marvin will be a stranger to the place he's found in."

"There can't be such a lot of strangers running around, witth sandy hair," suggested Barron.

"Find a *stranger*, with that hair, and you've got Marvin," said Rawlins. "When you do, you've got a small fortune."

"Have you asked about——?" Barron checked his words abruptly, and bit the end off a cigar, turning away his face to dispose of the bits of broken tobacco.

"Have I asked what?" demanded Rawlins.

"Oh, nothing," said Barron. "I was thinking of a man I saw in my last port, but you weren't there, of course. And I remember now that he belonged in the place."

"Sandy hair, I suppose," said Rawlins, with a smile. "I know how that is. It makes a man keep his eyes open when he's got that inside tip."

"I suppose so," said Barron. But there was an eager light in his eyes for all his casualness.

"Pretty slim description, just to have the color of a man's hair," went on Rawlins. "But I find it easy enough to check up without asking questions about a man, when his hair is the right shade."

"How do you do it?"

"I manage to get a look at his hands."

"Hands? What good does it do to look at his hands?"

Rawlins hesitated before he replied. He looked the skipper in the eye. "Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters if I take you into my confidence. Marvin has a wart on his thumb."

CAPTAIN BARRON gave a quick gasp of his breath, and stared at Rawlins. "A wart!" he whispered. "You say—Marvin has—and—and sandy ——!"

"I'll tell you one thing," interrupted Rawlins, in the same low tone that was little better than a whisper. "If I run into a man with sandy hair and a wart on his thumb, and he's a *stranger* to the place where he's hanging around, he goes along with me."

"You mean you'd arrest him! Why, you couldn't do that!"

"Couldn't I?" asked Rawlins, quietly. "What's to stop me?"

"But he'd put up a fight, and——"

"Maybe he would fight, and maybe he wouldn't. Anyhow, if I put a gun against his ribs, and took him along, he'd go, eh? He would, or I'd fill him full of lead."

Barron's eyes opened wider. He was strangely excited, yet he made an effort to pass it all off quietly and conceal from Rawlins all appearance of special interest. He gave a chuckling laugh now. "Why, what if this Marvin should take a shot at you?"

"I'll chance that—if I've got the drop. If I had to kill him, what would that matter? The reward is for Marvin, dead or alive."

"That's so," admitted Barron. "Dead or alive!" The words seemed to fascinate him. His fingers trembled as he held up the fresh cigar and licked the wrapper. He threw himself sidewise in his chair and lit his cigar, smoking reflectively while he was gazing at a calendar which advertised Japanese steaming-coal.

"Of course," went on Rawlins, "I'd be sure of having Marvin, with my inside tip on his description. Sandy hair and the wart. And once I had him, I'd also have the proof. He'd be sure to have something in his pockets, or his spare clothes, or in his luggage, that'd cinch the thing."

"Just what would you look for?" asked Barron, still staring at the calendar.

"Some of the loot. He got registered letters, and the bulk of the loot was in travelers' checks. You know, the kind the express companies issue. He could use 'em in a place like this, cashing one now and then. And another little inside tip I got from my friend—the checks were mostly of the Asiatic Company. A supply of those checks would be proof enough for me that I had the right man, though the description would be enough for me, checks or no checks. I'd just hold him for the authorities—and collect the reward."

Captain Barron considered all the points, his eyes closed against the rising smoke of his cigar. "I guess you're right," he admitted finally. "If you ran into such a man, you'd be a fool to let him slip through your fingers."

"I could use a fat reward like that," said Rawlins.

"Most of us could," admitted Barron.

"I'm going to order my breakfast—and have it in my room," said Rawlins, rising. "This Gill—I rather think he's just a

ordinary drunk, after all. But if I was you, Captain, I'd keep an eye out for a man with sandy hair and—you know." He winked, and started toward the door behind the bar.

"Sure, I will," assented Barron, rising also. "I've got to go back aboard my schooner a few minutes. Will you just tell Sammis I'll be back in half an hour or so?"

Rawlins nodded. Treading cautiously so Gill would not be disturbed, the skipper went to the side veranda, let himself over the low railing to the ground and made his way to the beach.

He signalled the schooner to send the dinghy off for him, and in a few minutes he was being rowed to the *Malacca Mail*. He told his sailors to hold the boat alongside, as he was going ashore again at once.

"When the tide favors, you might bring her to the jetty," he told his mate. "If you can't swing her that way, have the crew tow her in a little closer to shore. I won't want her too far out."

He went to his cabin and took from a drawer a pair of revolvers. He made sure they were in working condition, put extra ammunition into his side pockets, strapped holsters to his belt under the front flaps of his coat, and stuffed into his hip pocket a pair of handcuffs.

Then he went on deck and got over the side into the dinghy.

"Shore-side!" he commanded, and under his breath, added, "This morning ought to show a tidy little profit."

V

"WHAT'S become of Mr. Rawlins?" asked Barron, as he got back to the Penang Hotel.

"Oh, he went up the trail for a walk," said Sammis. "Said he wanted to keep out of the way of that bird Gill. What do you know about *that*, anyway?"

"About what?"

"This Gill guy. I didn't know he was up stairs at all. He just sneaked up and went to bed last night—and missed the steamer this morning. Handed me a beef about not callin' him! How could I call him if I didn't know he was here? And he's broke, too—left all his money in the safe of the steamer, he says. He's just a bum, I believe, and wants to eat here and sleep on us, on jawbone. Made a roar while you was gone that sounded like a lion and a half—and then went out to the side veranda again and went to sleep. Say! I wish I could bluff my way around the world like that!" He began to arrange the bottles on the shelf behind the bar.

"Seen anything of the chap who went over to the plantation? Haswell? He dug out of here while I was at breakfast."

"Ain't seen him. You know, skipper, I'm beginnin' to think there's a queer lot around this place." He spoke low and cautiously, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the side veranda, where Gill was asleep.

"What's the matter with 'em?" asked Barron.

"I can't say. But they're a lot of snoopers. All keepin' out of the way of the other feller, and, if you keep an eye on 'em, they're all watchin' and listenin', and goin' around on their toes like a lot of bull pups that expects a fight to start, but nobody dares to start it."

Captain Barron laughed and dropped into a chair. He lit a cigar and began to puff with steady deliberation. He had a good view of the stretch of beach beyond the palm grove, in the direction where Haswell had disappeared that morning on his way to the plantation.

Sammis continued to potter about behind the bar, but finding Barron not inclined to be talkative, deserted the place and got into his hammock on the back veranda.

It was near to tiffin time when Barron, staring through the straggling palms, caught a glimpse of a white figure dodging in and out among the trees at the far end of the clearing. The man walked about in such a manner that he kept in the shady spots, and at the same time drew near the hotel.

Captain Barron sat up straighter in his chair, all alert now, studying the approaching man.

"It's Haswell, right enough," he assured himself. His lips tightened over his teeth and he stood up and nervously paced across the room a couple of times, flexing his arms and fingers so as to be free from stiffness and ready for action.

Having thus prepared himself, he sat down in a chair facing the door to the entry, with a paper before him. But he kept his eyes on Haswell, who approached the hotel slowly.

The shimmering heat apparently had worn Haswell out, for as he got to the edge of the clearing he took a rest. His trudge along the glaring white sand outside the rim of the jungle had wearied him, for he leaned against the bole of a big palm tree,

took off his helmet and wiped his face with a big red handkerchief.

Also, Haswell covertly studied Gill, having spied the sleeping man in the deck chair on the veranda.

"That handkerchief may be a signal of some sort," reasoned Captain Barron. "Yet I'd say that Haswell doesn't want to run into Gill, if it can be avoided. Just the same, the pair of 'em may be in together. They may pretend not to know each other, and be in cahoots. I've got to play a quick game, and keep an eye out for the drunk—if he is drunk."

Haswell lingered in the palm grove. He seemed undecided about what he should do next. And all the time he remained standing there, partly concealed by the bole of the tree, he watched the hotel closely.

"He's suspicions of something around here," mused Barron. "Maybe it's me, or Rawlins. Probably don't want to run into Rawlins, and don't know he's gone for a walk. Maybe Rawlins has been givin' him a close look or two, but Rawlins can't know Haswell is Marvin, or I wouldn't been tipped off. I see now why this chap bolted away from me this morning—and why it gave him such a turn to find a strange schooner in. He's afraid of strangers, right enough."

Haswell finally swung off toward the beach again. Barron thought he had decided to return to wherever he had been during the morning, and the skipper muttered in disappointment.

But Haswell swung so as to pass the hotel and approach from the far side, the side away from where Gill was napping. To do this, Haswell was forced into the open sunlight. He was in no hurry, but as he walked, cast glances at the building, and with a final survey to make sure that the far side of the veranda was not occupied by anybody, he hurried to it.

Captain Barron shifted his chair so that he would have his back toward Gill and face Haswell as he entered.

Haswell climbed the steps to the veranda and walked into the little entry leading to the stairs. He had to pass the door opening into the common room. He stopped as he reached the open door, and looked in, hesitatingly, finding it difficult for a minute to see plainly in the comparative gloom of the interior of the hotel.

"Nice, hot mornin'," said Captain Barron, affably, looking up from his paper.

Haswell nodded, and peered past the skipper to where Gill's feet were visible through the *kajang* beyond. "Oh—yes—yes, it is," he said, a trifle startled.

"Cool in here," went on Barron. "Not any breeze to speak of, but with everything opened up, it's pleasant."

Haswell took a step toward the stairs, but changed his mind about going up, for he entered the common room with a doubtful glance about him.

"You look fagged out," said Barron. "And a drink wouldn't do you no harm, I'd say."

"Quite so," said Haswell. Seeing that the bar was deserted, he sat down at a table near the door leading to the stairs. It was apparent that he was not at all anxious to engage in conversation.

Captain Barron stood up and stretched himself lazily. "I think I'll have a bite of bitters myself," he said. "Maybe you'll join me. The boy'll be back in a minute—just called him."

Haswell nodded. "Oh, thanks," he said. But there was no enthusiasm in his words. Instead, he lifted his head as Barron approached, and gave him a cold stare, as if wondering why this stranger insisted in forcing his company upon a man he did not know.

Captain Barron had not called the boy, but knew that if Haswell thought the Chinese servant was coming presently, Haswell would not summon him. And Barron wanted nobody about at that particular moment.

Ignoring the stare, the skipper walked straight to the table occupied by Haswell, and pulled out a chair. But he did not sit down. Instead, he whipped out a revolver and thrust it forward toward Haswell.

"Make a move, and I'll shoot," said Captain Barron, quietly. "You're caught, Marvin."

VI

AS HASWELL saw the revolver, shoved within three feet of his chin, his head snapped back and his helmet tumbled on the floor behind him. His mouth opened in astonishment and his eyes blinked in wonderment. His face

paled, then reddened. "What's this?" he gasped. "You'll shoot me! I—I don't see——!"

"Oh, you'll see, right enough, before I'm done," said Barron softly. "Keep your hands on the table, just as they are. And don't call out for help or make a fuss. I'd just as soon take you dead as alive."

"Have you gone mad?" demanded Haswell, a pucker of annoyance between his eyes.

"I've got you!" snapped Barron. "No monkey shines! Listen to what I say, and do as I tell you. If I have to talk with hot lead, I can!" He reached into his side pocket with his left hand and pulled out the steel cuffs.

The sight of the irons made Haswell's lower lip quiver, and he drew his breath in a choking gurgle. "You—you're a officer of police, and——"

"Shut up!" warned Barron. He leaned forward to snap the open jaws of a handcuff over Haswell's wrist.

Haswel's hand shot upward and thrust the skipper's revolver aside. A bullet went into the thatch overhead, and as the report came, Haswell leaped to his feet, brought the small table upward with him and hurled it forward upon Barron.

The edge of the table caught Barron under the chin and the skipper was thrown violently backward. Haswell threw himself forward against the table, its legs being on both sides of him. They crashed to the floor together, Barron's revolver exploding again. The bullet ripped along the uneven edges of the yielding split-bamboo floor, and splintered into the base of the bar.

The skipper, on his back, with the tableboard between him and Haswell, wrenched with a free hand at the edge of the table, struggling to get it on edge, and free from its pinioning.

Haswell scrambled to his feet and fled for the entry door. Captain Barron, rising slowly, and bringing the table with him, got to his knees, and threw out his revolver-arm to get the weapon into play. Using the edge-up table as a shield, he crouched behind it now, and fired through the smoke at the retreating Haswell.

But Haswell got to cover behind the swale wall of the partition, and was probably either going up the stairs, or escaping from that side of the hotel.

Conscious of shouts behind him, and the voices of Sammis and Gill raised in amazed queries, the skipper remained on his knees for a minute, and peered through the smoke which was lifting slowly from the floor.

"Got away!" he mumbled, and without following the movements of his left hand along the floor, groped for the handcuffs, which he had dropped when he toppled over backward. "I'll get——"

But Haswell had not fled. The sandy haired man's head popped out from behind the casing of the door.

"He's gone mad!" cried Haswell to somebody behind Barron. "Look out for him!"

The captain took a snap shot. Where the bullet went he did not know. Anyhow, he realized at once that Haswell could not have been hit and seriously injured, for Haswell opened fire himself from behind his cover. The bullet tore a piece of wood from the edge of the table before Barron and went on into the bamboo wall.

Barron fired twice, both times into the bamboo wall which sheltered Haswell. It was the hope of the skipper to penetrate the basket-like partition and bring down Haswell in that fashion.

But again Haswell's head and arm appeared round the door-casing, and he returned the fire. Then he popped back out of sight. Barron pulled his trigger again, but the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Drawing the other revolver, the captain bounded to his feet and rushed at the entry door.

Haswell was just pushing out his arm again, with his pistol upraised to fire. He saw Barron almost upon him—and crashed the weapon downward. The muzzle tore a gash on the captain's forehead, but Barron already had dropped his own gun, and he grappled with Haswell.

They crashed down again—this time with Barron on top.

There was a rough-and-tumble battle for a minute or so. In this fight, Barron had all the advantage of strength and skill, and with his forehead bleeding, he hove himself up and dragged Haswell into the common room.

"I guess you didn't think I'd go after you, eh?" spluttered the captain, as he slammed the helpless Haswell against the wall. The captain shook his head to get the blood out of his eyes.

"It's all right, Sammis!" he called.

"Look out for that other chap. I ain't sure of him!" He glanced over his shoulder, looking for Sammis, but both he and Gill had disappeared.

"Sammis! Sammis!" yelled the captain.

"I'm all right," said Sammis, sticking his head up from behind the bar. "But I ain't crazy about bein' too thick in this place while there's so much lead sprayin' around. I'd like to know what this fight's all about, before I take sides. I can git shot with a pension tied to it without messin' in this fracas."

"Keep an eye on Gill!" warned Barron.

"Keep *both* eyes on me, if it does you any good," growled Gill, from the veranda door. "What am I to be picked on for, I'd like to know?"

"Belay the gab!" snorted Barron, and to Haswell he went on. "Now then! I've got you, wart and all! And as I told you back there a few minutes ago, you're just as valuable to me dead as you are alive. So if you make any more fight, I'll break your neck proper, and not wait for the hangman to do it!" He ended his threats by pounding Haswell violently against the wall, striking his head with dizzying force.

Haswell, already in a state of collapse from the punishment he had received from the captain in the hand-to-hand fight, moaned and struggled for breath. "Stop it!" he pleaded, "You're mad—and I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh, you know right enough," said Barron. "You can't talk your way out of this!" Seeing that Sammis had come from behind the bar, the skipper commanded him tartly, "Fetch the handcuffs—on the floor somewhere by the table! Look sharp! This man is Marvin, the train robber!"

Sammis gave a cry of surprise, and Gill joined in. The latter now came into the room from around the edge of an open *kajang*, where he had taken cover.

"So you've got him!" marveled Gill, standing rubbing his head with both hands. "Bully for you, skipper! But how did you know he was Marvin?"

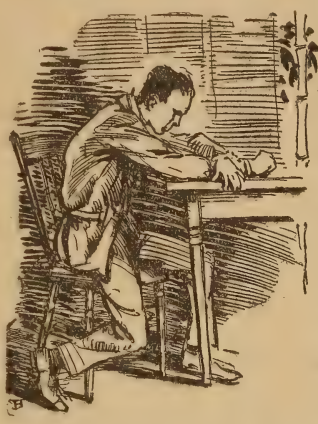
"Oh, shut up!" snapped Barron. "Don't bother me with your questions!"

Sammis delivered the cuffs, and Barron clicked them over the wrists of Haswell, who leaned limply against the wall.

"And that's the bird that's worth from ten to twenty thousand dollars!" said Gill, stepping closer to look at the captive. "Well, by George, skipper! You certainly made a business-like job of it! Just think of it! I might have got him myself!"

Barron lifted Haswell bodily and dumped him into a chair alongside a table. "There!" exclaimed the captain triumphantly, blowing blood from his lips as it streamed down over his face from the wound in his forehead. "You gave me a nasty smash, old boy—but it's worth it."

Haswell, pale and looking very ill, lay quiet in his chair, staring at the manacles on his hands. He was dazed, and seemed willing to wait until things had quieted down before he began to protest.



"And I never suspected that this man was Marvin," went on Gill. "Might have known this man wanted to keep out of the way of folks!"

Captain Barron gave a snort of disgust. "You've been full of gin all night—and all morning. Just kindly shut up, and keep your nose out of this, or——"

Haswell turned appealingly to Sammis. "I don't know why this man should want to kill me, or put irons on me. Somebody'll pay for this! You've got a madman on your hands, Sammis, and you'd better look out!"

"What can I do about it?" Sammis asked Haswell. "Captain Barron says you're Marvin. And the skipper has guns. I can't take any hand in this trouble, or I'll lose my job."

"See that you don't take any hand in it, Sammis," warned the skipper. "I know what I'm doin', and I'll stand responsible. I'll have this man out of here in short order, and aboard my schooner. First, I want to collect up his baggage and go through it. I'll prove——"

"I object to your taking my baggage!" cried Haswell. "I'll hold the hotel responsible if he does! I don't know what it's all about, except that it appears I've been arrested—and without a warrant. I'll sue this man. And if you give up my baggage, I'll sue the hotel, and——"

"Stow that gab!" said Barron sharply. "As far as your baggage is concerned, I'll

take it, protest or no protest from you or anybody else, so——"

"But there's nothing in my baggage that concerns you," said Haswell.

"There's evidence in it, or I'll eat my hat," said Barron. "I'll do the searching aboard the schooner, and that lets the hotel out."

"Go on with your madness," replied Haswell. "But you'll pay for it, mark me!"

"Give him a drink," said Barron, with a chuckle. "He knows there's no use his fighting. I've got him. And have his gear on the beach in ten minutes."

"You're right," chimed in Gill. "Get him out of here, skipper. He' playing for time, I'll bet!"

Captain Barron snatched the raincoat from the wall. "Here, you!" he said to Haswell. "This is your coat, ain't it?"

"Certainly it's my coat," said Haswell. "Is it a crime to own that coat?"

Barron hunted in the coat and finally threw out on the table a fat envelope tied with a string. He tore the packet open and threw down registered letters that had been rifled, and a package of fresh travelers checks of the Asiatic Company.

"There you are!" cried Barron to Sammis and Gill. "That's the goods! Registered letters, with the ends clipped off, and the travelers checks taken with the loot of the mail car. Just the stuff that Mr. Rawlins told me about this morning, while——"

"Oh, so Rawlins knew!" gasped Gill, his eyes snapping as he studied the evidence which Barron had produced from the coat. "So that's where you got your tip! But how did Rawlins know that this man ——?" He did not finish the question, but turned and stared at Sammis.

"The gin hound is loose again!" said Barron. "And full of questions! You better go out on the veranda and go to sleep!"

Gill laughed. "Don't be too hard on me, skipper, because I've been a little under the weather. Besides, I'm in a pickle myself, with my cash on board the *Japara,* and stranded here. That reward you'll get makes me envious; but I know a man when I see one, and I congratulate you on your success. You took an awful chance, to go after a man as desperate as this man is!"

"I'm not a desperate man!" moaned Haswell. "But I couldn't let this fool clamp steel cuffs on me, and shoot all over the place, without defending myself. I didn't try to hit him, just wanted to drive him away, and now you say I'm desperate! And that stuff out of my coat—I never saw it, never had it! You're all quite mad, and——"

"If you're wise, you'll get him out of here without delay, skipper," urged Gill confidentially. "He's thinking up some way to give you the slip."

"When I lose him, I'll let you know—and you can catch him up for me!" retorted Barron scornfully. "Now, then, Sammis, hustle that baggage to the beach. Set out a bucket of water for me to wash up—and a drink, and I'll be on my way to deliver this chap to the authorities. I won't abuse him, or——"

"I wish to heaven the authorities were here now," said Haswell. "I'm in this place to see about buying the plantation for my employers, on the quiet. They told me to say nothing to anybody, or they'd have other companies bidding against 'em for the property. That's the only reason I've avoided strangers."

"I'm not interested in that fairy story," snapped Barron. "Get your drink, and be ready to move out in ten minutes."

Barron busied himself by washing the blood from his face and treating the wound. Then he had a drink himself, and following the Chinese boy with Haswell's bags, took his prisoner to the beach and embarked in the dinghy for the schooner.

VII

"I SAY, what's all the excitement?" asked Rawlins, as he entered the common room, twenty minutes after Barron had left with his prisoner. "All the servants at the back of the house gabbling away like a lot of scared geese!"

Sammis and Gill told him what had happened. "And he's just gone aboard his schooner with Marvin," concluded Gill.

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed Rawlins. "So that was the train robber, was it! Fancy us not knowing!"

"Oh, it sure was Marvin," said Gill. "Captain Barron found the evidence in the raincoat that was hanging up there!"

"And to think that I missed all that show," said Rawlins.

"I wasn't crazy about it," said Gill. "The place was full of bullets for a while. What makes me sick is to think of how I let that man slip through my fingers!"

Rawlins grinned. "Would you have taken him, really? From what you two've told me, this Marvin was a dangerous man to capture. I doubt I'd have tackled him."

"I would," said Gill.

"Me, too," said Sammis. "If I could have known what the skipper did!"

"The train robber was such a gentlemanly chap," went on Rawlins. "It's simply amazing! Of course, Captain Barron must have had inside information—description, and so on?"

"Had the dope, yes," admitted Gill. "That's how he got the bulge on the rest of us. We didn't know about any wart on a thumb, and so on. And the registered letters cinched it!"

Rawlins looked out over the bay. "The schooner is getting up her anchor," he remarked. "So that's good-by to Marvin, so far as we're concerned."

"Lucky thing somebody about the place didn't get winged," said Sammis.

"When's the next boat out for Javaway?" asked Rawlins. "It's getting tiresome, waiting here so long." He moved to the bar and leaned his elbows on it.

"Tiresome!" grinned Sammis. "You missed the best show we've had in a long time, and now you complain that it's tiresome in this place! And I told Captain Barron this mornin' that nothin' ever happened here! I'll say that the little fracas this place has just seen'll hold me for awhile!"

"And me—for awhile!" echoed Gill, passing behind Rawlins.

Then Rawlins felt a pair of hands encircle his throat. Before he had any idea of what was happening, he was jerked backward and doubled over a knee thrust out by Gill, who had bent to the floor as he threw Rawlins backward.

Sammis gave a startled cry, and then froze into immobility as he watched the scene before the bar.

Rawlins struggled, but Gill had him in a strangling grip. And Gill was a powerful man. Rawlins turned pale, then a blueish tingue came over his face and lips. His eyes bulged, he thrashed the floor with his feet, he squirmed wildly, seeking to get air into his lungs. Gill kept that terrific pressure of his fingers upon the throat of the struggling victim.

"Stop it!" yelled Sammis. "You're chokin' him!"

Gill made no reply. With a final convulsive shudder of his body, Rawlins lapsed into unconsciousness. It was then that Gill swung the limp body of Rawlins away from him, and twisting the hands of the unconscious man under him, hove him up on a table, and snatching a handkerchief from a pocket, bound the hands.

Sammis came running out from behind the bar.

"It's all right, Sammis," said Gill. "The morning's show isn't over. Don't interfere with me. I want this chap, and I want him bad!"

"But why do you want Mr. Rawlins?" asked the astounded Sammis. "If I'd known you was drunk, I——"

"I'm sober as a judge," said Gill, without taking his eyes from the man stretched across the table. "I know what I'm doing. Not having guns and handcuffs, like Barron, I'm doing this in my own way. Just as good as any." As he talked he was going through the pockets of Rawlins. And as he finished, he fished out an automatic pistol.

"But Mr. Rawlins ain't done anything!" objected Sammis. "You've made a mistake."

"I ain't made any mistake," went on Gill. "It was Barron who made the mistake. This man is Marvin."

"Marvin! You're loco! How can there be two Marvins?"

"There aren't two Marvins," said Gill quietly. "Just one, and this is the one."

"But that evidence, Barron found it in the raincoat——"

"Certainly he did," said Gill. "The evidence was there, all right, but this chap put it there. When Barron went out to his schooner, the first time, he and this man thought I was having a snooze. I heard somebody walking around in here, on mighty tender feet, and, as I had my face close to the bamboo wall, I got my fool eye close to a crack in the split bamboo and saw this man put the envelope in Haswell's coat. I didn't know what it meant then, but, when Barron pulled it out as evidence against Haswell, the wheels began to go around in my head and I asked myself how Rawlins come to have them registered letters and travelers' checks, anyway, to put in Haswell's coat."

"Say, that is kind of funny!" said Sammis, the light of understanding breaking over his face.

"It was a smooth dodge," went on Gill, watching the man stretched across the table quiver and begin to breathe again. "This chap Marvin knew that if he could get somebody captured as the train robber, it would be easier to travel. You see, nobody would suspect Marvin was loose around here, if Marvin was supposed to be on his way to Zamboanga, a prisoner in Barron's schooner. You noticed how this chap asked right off the bat,

as soon as we told him that Barron had the train robber, about a boat for Javaway? Sure he did? He bunked the skipper by giving him a description of Marvin that fitted Haswell."

The man on the table drew a deep breath, shuddered, and opened his eyes. He stared up at Gill. "What—what happened?" he croaked. "What——?" But he could say no more, for his throat hurt so that he made a face.

"We'll tell you all about it when you feel better," said Gill. "Just keep quiet. Oh, Sammis! Send somebody to the schooner for Captain Barron. He'll be sore as a goat! He'd better stick to skippering schooners, instead of sitting in a poker game that's played with forty-five-caliber chips, made of lead. But I'll pay him well to take me and Marvin to Zamboanga. I've got an appointment with the government—me and Marvin."

Cowboy
By Clem Yore
Great is your heart, your big, brave heart,
Cowboy.
Good and raw and bold and wide,
Fit to match your honest hide,
And every beat is clean inside,
Cowboy.
Clear is the sheen of your untamed eye,
Cowboy.
A little bit of your unsmoked sky,
With nothing slick or smooth or sly,
But, altogether, a damn good eye,
Cowboy.
Where did you really come from, son?
Cowboy.
You outlaw, unbroke son of a gun,
Handy with your feet, but bad on a run
Once you know a scrap's begun,
Cowboy.
What will you be when the round-up's done?
Cowboy.
Where will you be when they ring the bell?
And what are the tales you then will tell?
Will you fight broncs on the range of hell?
Cowboy.
I like the cut of your sun-cooked jaw,
Cowboy.
And doff my hat to your code and law
You're the whitest man I ever saw,
And I'm plumb delighted to shake your paw,
Cowboy.

THE FREIGHT BOSS

By E. S. PLADWELL

Author of "The High Trail," etc.

FREIGHT LINE RIVALRY FOUGHT OUT AMID THE TOWERING HILLS; NO TACTICS BARRED, AND BRUTE FORCE THE WEAPON LIKELIEST TO WIN. UNTIL A NEW ELEMENT STEPPED IN—BUT IT STILL MEANT WAR TO THE LAST CRATE AND THE LAST STONE ON BITTERLY CONTESTED ROADS

I

THE cold winds of early December shrieked across a bare hill country, making sand dust leap in front of Thomas Lane's lamps like spinddrift flashing across a ship's bows. Thomas Lane, broad-shouldered and black-bearded, let his aged motor-truck slow down as he reached a summit. He looked across a large treeless valley which was darkening rapidly. Across the valley was a violent red flare. It came from beyond a small mound at the foot of a range of bleak hills.

"House afire?" inquired Lane, a stranger in the land.

"No house there," grunted his lanky companion, who was guiding Lane during the latter's initial round trip as employe of a freight-line.

"Oh," said Lane.

The bony, unshaven, lantern-jawed, guide, smelling of stables, flashed a sidewise glance at the new driver, a man of about forty, who had wandered in like a hobo, though he was different from any hobo the guide had ever seen. Lane's forehead was too high, his black hair too well kept, his brown eyes too tranquil, his nose and mouth too stern, his corduroy-clad body too neat and also too well-nourished, as shown by a slight paunch. The guide resented the man's air of quiet authority.

"It's nothin', that fire!" reiterated the guide, speaking to the winds.

Lane let the old truck wheeze past the summit. The winds shrieked up from the cold valley and pounded at the machine while it skidded and bounced over frozen ruts; but it reached the flat lands finally and sped across them. The flare came nearer, behind a hill in silhouette.

Lane's voice was a quiet bass. "It must be a wagon burning!"

His companion flashed another sidewise glance.

"You're workin' for Herman Brod. Herman Brod likes people to mind their own business."

"Oh, so this burning wagon belongs to the rival freighter, McCracken?"

"I ain't sayin'. I dunno nothin' except safety first. Now, you've got a good job on this here motor-truck. Chances are you can work all winter here!"

Lane smiled under his glossy beard and sped the truck up a little dry-grass canyon. The red glare came close, beyond the black

hill. A few wind-blown cinders brought the smell of wood smoke.

The truck turned the hill. A warm, fierce mass of dancing fire glowed in the driver's eyes from a small gulley at his right. Lane stopped.

"Go on!" urged the guide.

Lane, throwing out the clutch, sat back and appraised the scene deliberately.

"A freight wagon and a trailer! Queer how a wagon-wheel burns around from under the tires! That outfit must have been hauled off the road at right-angles. I see where a wheel passed over yonder sagebrush. It must have taken many horses. Where are the horses? The driver?"

"Never mind about them! Go on!"

Lane turned his big body slowly and peered at the speaker, whose long-jawed face seemed to be flickering nervously in the light from the flames.

Lane spoke slowly. "Do folks pass up mysteries in this country?"

The lanky man frowned. "You're workin' for Herman Brod, see? You're drivin' his truck! See?"

Lane turned off the ignition.

"Hey!" bawled his companion.

"Listen!" said Lane.

Above the crackling and popping of the fire came the tinny noise of a flivver approaching somewhere ahead.

The lanky guide became agitated. "Turn away! Back up!"

"Why? We haven't done anything wrong!"

"Aw——it's too late now! Set still!"

The flivver scooted into sight from a turn in the dark road. Its two flickering lights came straight into the better illumination of Lane's lamps, stopping ten feet away.

Lane's yellow glare flashed on a young man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and gray overcoat, who uncoiled his long body and swung his high laced boots over the side of the flivver. Under his flying coat Lane saw blue overalls and a gun in a leather holster.

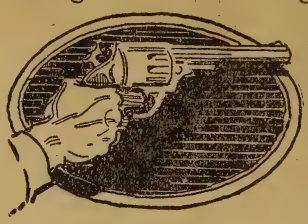
The young man went straight to the freight truck. He jumped on its running-board. Lane observed that his intelligent brown eyes were set far apart under a broad forehead, though his chin was narrow and pointed. His voice was savage.

"Who set fire to my wagons?"

Then the newcomer recognized Lane's lanky guide.

"Oh, Jennings, caught you! Caught you, didn't I, Jennings? Red-handed! Well, I'm glad of that."

The young man reached downward with his right hand. The big revolver came forth. Lane, in the small light from the dash-lamp, noted the hard gray slugs of lead peeping out from all its chambers. The muzzle of the weapon went under the crown of Jennings' torn black hat. The hat actually raised itself on his head!



"No," yelped Jennings, clawing at the air. "Take it away. My Gawd, you wouldn't shoot me! We just got here, Harry. We're bringin' freight. Ask the agent on the Santa Fe. We just left there, two hours ago. Honest to Gawd! Put it down, put it down."

"You lie," rasped the young man uncertainly.

"It's the truth!" interposed Lane.

The newcomer's eyes flashed at him. "Who are you?"

"A new driver."

The young man hesitated. He let down the muzzle of the revolver while the lanky man sighed with relief. Suddenly the newcomer sheathed his gun and yanked his coat off.

He yelled at Jennings, "Get off that truck. Stand up. You sneak, you're in on this, you and Brod and the whole gang. Come on, I'm going to make you pay."

"You lemme alone," yelped Jennings.

"Come off that car before I blow you off."

Jennings squirmed and clawed at Lane's thighs. Lane sensed the appeal, but this feud didn't interest him. Besides, his muscles still ached from the labor of loading the truck. He wasn't used to loading trucks.

The guide made a last gibbering protest to Lane. "You hain't goin' to fight for your job? My gosh, wait till Herman Brod learns that!"

"Let him learn. I'm going to look at the fire."

Lane arose stiffly and left the machine, drawing his overcoat tighter to ward off the cold winds which drove even through the heat of the flaming embers. He walked about and tried to visualize the burned vehicle and cargo from the mass of red wood and the white-hot tires, bolts, springs and nails which shone like jewels.

A muffled cry for help came to his ears. Lane looked around. He saw Jennings

beaten, staggering toward the fire, with his knees sagging.

"Stop it," growled Lane, to the young victor.

The victor glared. Lane silently went over to the fallen man and lifted his shoulders. Jennings was a wreck. Lane got a canteen from the truck and swabbed the awful face. The younger man stood motionless, with fists clenched.

Suddenly he spoke again. His voice was piteous. "My God, I can't fight that crowd!"

Lane looked up. "Are there no peace officers?"

"They couldn't get anywhere. You don't understand the country, mister. I've got to go it alone."

The young man, as if realizing futility, turned and departed. Lane managed to dump Jennings into the freight truck. In a short time it was pulling upward through bare hills.

"Wasn't that young Harry McCracken?" asked Lane.

No answer.

"He seemed to expect something."

Jennings turned his swollen face toward Lane. "Wait till Herman Brod sees you."

"What of it?"

"Aw, you don't know nothin'," growled the guide disgustedly, and then there was silence.

Lane drove ahead through hills thick with chemise and manzanita. His truck growled up a steep grade along the side of a yawning black canyon. The air became colder. Trees appeared, and grew taller. For several miles the lamps flared on deer-brush, chaparral pines and firs. Suddenly they shone on the stark smooth brown limbs of a Judas tree.

"We're near there," mumbled Jennings.

"I'm glad," agreed Lane. "My hands are cold."

"Huh, you'll warm up soon!"

The truck made a long descent through elders, birch and aspen. Lane finally discerned lights at the bottom of the hill. In five minutes he drew up alongside an enormous barn at his left, where lanterns shone from many doors and stall-windows. The barn was warm and smelly. A cluster of men stood near the broadest entrance. Lane got down from the truck. His hands started to undo the ropes which held the cargo. Jennings disappeared. Shortly he returned. Alongside him strode a broad-shouldered giant, an enormous silhouette in the light from the barn door. Herman Brod!

The boss of the freighters walked around to the end of the wagon, where the light struck his powerful head, with its small eyes, red face and scraggly blonde beard. He reeked of the stables. Wisps of hay were on his wrinkled clothes. His boots clung around legs as thick as the ordinary man's thighs. In his right hand was a bull-whip, coiled.

"So," growled Brod, "so you don'd fight for your chob, hey? You let Chennings get biffed, hey? What for?"

"That was none of my business," explained Lane.

"So, none of your pisness! So! All right. Get oud, go home! We don'd want no yellow dawks. Get oud."

"That will do."

Lane's angry voice snapped with the authority of a man accustomed to respect; but he might as well have spoken to a bull-buffalo.

"So-ho! You talk back to me, eh?"

The giant reached out the mighty arm which held the whip, grasping Lane by the collar. Lane was powerful, but this man was like a gorilla. He yanked Lane toward him, clubbing downward with a fist that made Lane's face feel as though an iron bar had crashed into it. He saw sparks. His right cheek went numb. He staggered backward.

"You've gone a little too far," he gasped in a voice trembling with outrage.

"What?"

The noise brought several men to the doorway. Brod stepped forward. His hand grabbed Lane by the throat. The other held the loop of the bull-whip and struck with the dangling end.

The lash seemed to burn a hole through Lane's clothes.

Rage seized him. He twisted. He tried to strike out. The inexorable hand held him. Whack! Whack! Whack! Lane's flesh curled under his shoulders. He clutched at the steely arm holding his throat, but could not tear it away. A broad thumb threatened to throttle him. The fiery lash struck again. Whack!

"I am boss," roared Brod, raising his

arm for another slash. "I am boss. No?"

"You blockhead, what do you mean by this?"

"So-ho!" Brod was thoughtful now. "We have a stiff neck! All righd. We cure that."

He ran several paces toward the shadows near the barn door. He quickly uncoiled the thick leather bull-whip and slung it along the ground, where it wriggled and rustled as it took up slack. Lane wondered. Suddenly Brod twisted his arm and wrist. The wicked lash sprang back of him. It flashed for one tiny instant in the light——

A cannon exploded one inch from Lane's face. Concussion made him tingle. His ears rang. His mouth and lips felt numb. That terrific whip-crack could have taken the flank off a mule!

"Go," bellowed the wagon-boss, pointing up the road. "Oud, oud! I see you here again, I gif you a real one."

Thomas Lane revolted. Pain and rage possessed him.

"You swine, what do you mean by this?"

Brod, astonished, lowered his bull-whip. "It izz dizipline!" he argued slowly.

"Keep your discipline for your own kind, then. Let strangers alone."

"Strangers! You work for me—you drive my truck—you let Chennings get biffed—and now you are strangers mit me. Gott, what a tongue! No, no. Peebles who work for me are my men. Strangers! You liar!"

"I guess you're hopeless," exploded Lane.

Tingling and burning from his hurts, he turned toward the dim lights of the small frame buildings across the dirt road. Subconsciously he noted that the lights of a flivver were coming down the long grade; but a yell from behind him apprised him that the giant had worked up his passions again.

Brod was upon him. The huge wagon-boss bowled him over. Lane struggled on the hard ground to get from under. A massive fist nearly broke his ribs. Brod laid on him.

"So I am hopeless," howled Brod. "And in vront of my own men! Hopeless! So! Now you get some dizipline."

"Oh!" shouted a feminine voice beside Lane. "Mr. Brod, don't. Please! You're hurting him."

"Sure," yelled Brod. "This man gifs me lip, in vront of my own men. No! I am boss. I stay boss."

"But you shouldn't maim him."

Lane managed to look up. He saw a shadowy feminine figure towering above him, a form in black and white against the cold stars.

Brod bawled at her, "You run der school —I run der freight-wagons. Shud ub."

"But this is brutal."

Brod arose slowly. Lane's wobbling knees allowed him to do likewise, though he swayed.

"Broodle?" growled Brod. "I got to be broodle for such dumb-heads. You go home."

The woman disappeared into the shadows. Brod lost his vehemence. He growled at the dizzy Lane.

"We got no room for you. Get oud."

Lane, physically helpless, turned away and staggered across the hard dirt road, stumbling toward an abandoned, half-ruined shanty among the trees, where he had laid his blanket-pack.

"This is all wrong," he mumbled.

He felt pain in every muscle. He realized that years of easy living had rendered him unfit for the ordeal he had just undergone; but above the awful hurts he felt a sense of unreality, as if Brod, Jennings and the burned wagon were merely symbols for a cold, grim, brutal environment that was more real than they were.

"I can't stand for that," muttered Lane.

The corner of his shanty hit him in the forehead. He leaned against the wall. He fumbled for the rotting door. He found it. It swung inward. A stray cat flashed past him and vanished into the forest; but he never saw it.

He fell in a heap upon the rickety floor.

"And I came for a nice, quiet vacation!" he groaned.

II

LANE awoke to the sound of heavy boots upon the creaking floor. He looked up into the broad eyes and slim jaw of Harry McCracken, the young man of the burned wagon. The open door disclosed evergreen trees, sparkling in the sunlight of mid-morning.

"Well, how do you feel?" inquired McCracken.

Lane stirred painfully in his blankets.

The bitter cold had made him crawl into them during the night.

"Too bad," continued McCracken. "But that's Brod. No brains, all muscle. He wallops everybody. It's a habit."

Lane, fully awake, studied McCracken's contradictory face.

"Aren't you Brod's rival?" asked Lane. "You don't look as if you'd been walloped!"

"Oh, I'm about the best shot in the county. I was here before them; I can take care of myself. But my men and wagons—that's different!"

"I thought Brod was senior," remarked Lane.

"In the freight business? No. My dad freighted for the big gold mines in the back hills, and the desert beyond them. He died. Things got bad then. The gold mines quit working during the war. Then Brod came in with his family—about three years ago. People thought the gold mines would open up again, so Brod started a wagon or two."

"And you let him compete?"

"I didn't care. I expected there'd be plenty of business for both. But the mines mostly didn't open. Low-grade ore doesn't pay any more. Cost of operation is too high. That knocked the bottom out of things. Then Brod got bull-headed. Bought more wagons and more men. Said he'd be the one to survive. That's why he makes everybody call him boss. It's part of his program. But the question is, what are you going to do? Let him run you out?"

Lane smiled under his beard at this boyish approach.

"Hardly!" he remarked.

"Well?"

"I don't know. I am very sore right now."

"Oh, liniment will fix that. Fact is, I'm looking for men that don't scare easy. Most of 'em are quitters. Brod can chase 'em away from their teams."

"Why not get auto-trucks?"

"Won't do. They can't make the grades back yonder, especially in winter."

He pointed out of the doorway toward the higher inland mountain ridges with their thick forests, a mass of dark green treetops against the blue of the sky.

"It's a mean grade. After you get up to the summit, you slide down to the desert and the mines. Brod and I keep extra stock at the summit. Sometimes our teams meet on the grades. Then there's trouble."

"Not very enticing," remarked Lane drily. "Besides, I don't know how to drive a big team."

McCrackeen poked the toes of his high-laced boots into a crack in the floor.

"It's easy to learn," he said diffidently. "You drive with a jerk line. The horses are gentle. Nothing to it." He shrugged. "Of course, that's up to you."

Lane's keen eyes narrowed slightly. He liked the fellow's broad forehead and frank eyes, but he wasn't quite so sure of the pointed chin or that gash of a mouth.

However, "You tempt me. Let's try that liniment."

McCracken produced his mystic bottle. Shortly he led Lane through the village and beyond it, toward where the weather-beaten roof of a great barn appeared above the trees.

Lane's observant eyes caught the contrast between the settlement's drabness and the jubilant freshness of the wintry woods. He noted the dirty Brod barn, with its scattering of sloppy-looking men, chewing tobacco. He observed grimy brats playing in front of the rickety store. His path was beset by dogs, pigs and chickens. He almost trod upon a drunken man lying beside the road. Behind him came a feminine giggle. He turned to see a slim blonde girl in sleazy clothes, caressed by a lanky man in overalls who reminded him of Jennings. Lane halted.

"Is that the girl who pleaded for me last night?"

"No. That's Nellie Brod. She's common. Come on!"

"Oh!" said Lane.

He passed a grove of white birch and came upon the sun-cracked boards of the vast barn. Alongside it were three wagons, enormous platforms on wheels. Grass grew under them.

"We used to keep 'em all working," explained McCracken. "I can't afford the horses now." He clenched his fist and his voice rose. "Stay with me. Learn to drive a team. You look as if you might have something in you. Help me. I've got my back to the wall."

There was silence from Lane. Then, "How many wagons are you running?"

"I had three yesterday," bitterly. "There's two now. I think one of the

Jennings brothers did that. I'll learn later." McCracken controlled himself. "One of my outfits runs to the sawmill, up above town yonder. The other goes over the grade to the desert mines. You'd better go with that. Learn the country."

"I might as well. I'll see tomorrow."

"Suit yourself."

Lane walked to get rid of his stiffness. He bought breakfast at the store and made his way up the local side-road which led to a small sawmill above town. The road was sunny and inviting, though it started from the local garbage dump.

He swung uphill, past a forest of scrub-pine, a pair of abandoned cabins, and a little white schoolhouse with green shutters and a flagpole. He passed a small house, a cow-pasture and a grove of quaking aspens, climbing at last to the end of the road, where it turned into the lumber yard. He spied an inviting side path which led upward through cool groves of trees. He climbed for a good half-mile. Once he looked back.

The settlement lay far below him, among its green trees and pastures. An eagle flew high in the skies and threw its moving shadow upon roofs, coops and fields; and Lane watched it until it vanished, leaving only a sunny stillness. He caught himself humming the words of an old missionary hymn:

> "Where every prospect pleases
> And only man is vile."

He continued upward over cold, moist ground, coming into mossy thickets and clumps of ferns in a great silent forest. He struggled up over a rise. Suddenly his eyes beheld a little lake whose waters were opal-green, transparent to the rocky depths. He went to the edge and splashed his hand in the water. Icy!

He stood and chafed his numbed hand, and as he did so he noted a flash of white. He stared. Alongside a golden bush, at the entrance to a mossy green corridor in a shadowed forest, he observed an indistinct feminine figure, clad in a blue-gray-green woolen affair which blended with the rock where she was sitting. She was reading a book, and it was a page which had glinted.

Lane approached her.

"Wasn't it you who pleaded for me last night?"

He found himself looking into thoughtful gray-blue eyes in a slim face crowned by reddish-brown hair and capped with a dark tam-o'-shanter. She seemed of medium height and about twenty-two. Her voice was a low, soft contralto. She smiled and nodded.

"Poor Mr. Brod always goes to extremes."

"Yes," agreed Lane. "He might study manners."

"I'm afraid they think they can't afford manners. They're fighting to survive. It's pitiable."

Lane noted her good English. "I hear you teach school," he said. "How did you get into this country?"

"Oh, I heard of the vacancy. I got the position."

"And before that?"

She frowned slightly. "Everything, I guess. Store, china-painting, office, even the movies—though that's disillusion. I'm from Los Angeles. My parents died. I've had to make my own way."

"And you like it here?"

She was hesitant. "Well, the children are dear. And then there are the woods and the lake. I always come here Saturdays."

"Is this Nellie Brod one of your pupils?"

"Yes. Poor Nellie! She's a lovable, sweet-tempered girl, but——"

"I know. No chance in this country! By the way, may I ask your name?"

"Marian Irwin." She appraised his corduroy-clad bulk, somewhat curiously. "How did you happen to come?"

"I'll tell you; I couldn't jump a hedge."

The girl's blue-gray eyes looked incredulous.

"A common two-foot-six evergreen hedge!" continued Lane inexorably. "I tried to jump it one morning. My body didn't have any spring to it. Years of office work had sapped it. I saw where I was heading. So I dropped my work and started for the mountains."

The girl still looked puzzled. "Seeking youth?"

He winced slightly. "No. Not that. I wanted speed. Power. Vigor. I wanted the old adventure spirit."

"But your family?"

"I have none."

"But your business?"

"If my business cannot stand my temporary absence, I'll know the reason. I own the Lane Iron Foundries."

"And you couldn't get exercise there?"

"Strength, yes. Speed, adventure and a new viewpoint, no."

"But are there no gymnasiums?"

"Gymnasiums! Hot-houses! One-two-three exercises, by rote. Business men's

classes—tired business men, perfunctory business men, and only half serious. Where's the adventure in that? I used to climb mountains; blaze trails; fight my way. I fought for my first forge. I fought to build a company. I fought to merge others. And when the fighting was over, I found myself a machine, a creature of routine, sitting in an office, getting reports, opening the daily letters, traveling over the same da—the same old routine. Getting sluggish. My heavens, do you know what it means to wake up and find you can't even jump a little two-foot hedge?"

She gazed at a white rock glinting below the turquoise shadows. Her next remark surprised him.

"I can see that Mr. Brod was very unwise."

"Perhaps I can deal with him."

"No. Please! Keep out of it."

"Maybe I'd straighten things out around here."

"Perhaps," she surrendered dubiously. "What do you intend to do?"

"I don't know. I'll watch and wait. But please do not discuss me to others. What's the use——?"

A raucous "Haw-haw-haw" echoed about the woods. Lane saw one of the slouchy Jennings brothers passing along the path, vanishing on the other side of the lake. He turned to the girl.

"Perhaps you'd better come home with me."

"No, thanks. I'd rather not, really. Mr. Jennings is very friendly. Do not worry about me. I'd rather stay."

She lifted the book in her lap. Lane caught the implied dismissal, and then he realized he was in a gossipy settlement, where everybody had to be careful. He looked down into her eyes.

"Oh," he said.

Somehow those eyes reminded him of lilacs. Why lilacs? He didn't know, perhaps it was their color, but they piqued him. Why pique? He still didn't know. He studied her with more interest. She flushed slightly, and then he remembered that she was not a hammer or a steel casting, to be inspected at leisure, so he turned away, and nodded again.

"I'm glad I met you," he remarked.

He swung down to the path, reached his ancient cabin and began to fish things out of his pack. He hung a mirror on a rusty nail near a cobwebbed window, assembled a safety-razor, filled a tin can with water from a nearby brook, worked soap into his beard, and then, toiling ferociously, raked wide swaths off his face with the agonizing razor. In ten minutes he completed the right side, which burned like hot fire. There was a feeling of nakedness about the face, but somehow it looked more familiar. His beard was recent.

He started to rake through the other side. A thought struck him. He stiffened. He stared at the mirror resentfully.

"You darned fool!" he muttered. "Why, you're old enough to be her father!"

He tossed the razor into the can of soapy water and gazed out of the cobwebbed window-panes.

"Idiot!" he exploded. "Now, why did I start that?"

His eyes caught a movement from an ivy-covered stone wall, downhill, toward the settlement. He saw a tall man in ragged blue overalls, a stranger, slipping furtively around the corner of the wall, dodging behind a clump of elders and then speeding uphill as fast as his cowhide boots could work. He passed Lane's shack, and disappeared.

Confused shouts came from the settlement. Lane finally caught a word.

"Fire!"

He ran out of the house, toward town, and saw several men racing into the grove of white birch beyond it. Some carried pails. Lane, sensing where the trouble was, took a rotting grain-sack from the roadside near Brod's dirty stable, wet it hastily in an icy brook, and ran toward a small cloud of smoke at the rear of McCracken's old barn.

McCracken was there before him, whacking with a wet sack at charred wallboards. His face was streaked with black.

"Good I was here," panted McCracken, in a savage voice, as Lane came alongside him. "So theye've come to that!" He splashed his sack into a bucket of water and smacked it against a smoldering joist. "How can a fellow fight this sort of thing? There, it's out. They did a hasty job that time. But next time——"

He hurled the wet sack into the bucket and wrung his cold hands passionately.

"They're getting me. The yellow dogs!

Why can't they let a fellow make a living in his own country?"

Suddenly he grasped Lane's broad shoulders.

"Help me. I can't fight 'em alone. You look like something solid!"

McCracken's jaw slackened and his eyes bulged.

"My God!"

Lane, puzzled, put hand to jaw; and then he remembered. Half his face wore a splendid black beard; the other half was clean.

He turned and ran like a coward.

III

IT IS no sinecure to water and harness many horses in a cold barn at dawn, when fingers are numb and eyes are sleepy, as Thomas Lane soon learned. Sometimes when groping around in the dubious light from lanterns he dreamed of the soft white bed in his steam-heated apartment in the city; but resolutely he thrust its picture out of his mind, plying raw fingers against stiff leather or icy buckles while his body clamored for ease and his breath blew steam against the flanks of elderly draft animals.

He fought his indisposition with a sort of savage pleasure, recognizing that he was battling against the very indolence into which the soft white bed had beguiled him, and then he knew that he couldn't quit McCracken just now. The odds against the young fellow had aroused Lane's sympathy.

He noted on the first afternoon of his employment that McCracken was not making expenses. He saw it in one glance at a ten-horse wagon, bound inland for the big grade and the desert mines. The wagon was merely a bare platform with a few cases of soap and canned goods piled in the center.

"Too little"; Lane thoughtfully stroked his smooth, tight chin. "You must be operating on past profits."

McCracken's intelligent eyes narrowed. "You might put it that way. Don't rub it in." He jerked a thumb toward the settlement. "Go over to the store, will you, and get me some copper rivets? These traces are getting weak in spots."

Lane obediently made for the emporium whose dirty windows displayed cartons of coffee stacked in a pyramid which was falling out of alignment. As he turned into the doorway an enormous figure loomed before him. Herman Brod!

"So," exclaimed Brod, "you are here yet!"

"I thought I'd stay," retorted Lane mildly.

Brod looked as enormous by day as by dark. The massive torso with its thick shoulders and great swinging arms made Lane feel small. Brod's bullet-like head swung outward from a low forehead to a heavy jaw, giving the effect of terrific truculence, emphasized by the forward thrust of the stubbly beard. His only redeeming feature was his eyes. They were small, slightly almond, somewhat slanted, but not lacking in humor.

"Oh, well; it ain'd much difference. You are only a denderfoot."

He dismissed Lane with a gesture, and passed out.

Lane completed his errand. He returned to the porch thoughtfully. Brod had disappeared, but Lane observed Marian Irwin, books in hand, coming down a grassy path bordered by oak trees hung with mistletoe. Her quiet tweed suit blended with the trees, making the pinkness of her face and the reddish gold of her hair stand out in stark relief.

She smiled and waved.

"I thought you'd look something like this with your beard off!" she remarked, slowing down. "Have you been jumping any hedges yet?"

"Not yet. I'm too tired now."

She gazed toward the Brod barn.

"I hope there'll be no more trouble," she murmured, resuming her walk.

Lane watched her until she turned the corner. A voice sounded alongside him. It came from the old white-bearded storekeeper, whose collar-button gleamed in his dirty white shirt, perpetual proxy for a missing collar and scarf.

"Likely gal, that school-ma'am. When young McCracken's got a gal like that, mebbe he ain't so down-and-out after all."

"I didn't know she was anyone's girl."

"Heh! Wa-al, stranger, you don't suppose she'd be around very long without somebody keepin' company with her, do you?"

"No. I suppose not."

"Sure not! Mebbe some day they'll marry, mebbe."

Lane nodded and descended the steps, but he felt a helpless irritation. Why had his years flown so quickly? But resolutely he thrust the matter from his mind.

McCracken was kind during the next two weeks. He taught Lane the lore of the freight-teams, sent him through the country with a driver, showed him the tricks of the jerk-line, and finally judged him safe enough to handle a team over the big grade. Lane's marching-orders came while he was eating a belated evening repast in the overheated kitchen of the storekeeper. McCracken stalked in, bringing the smell of cold air and hay.

"I guess you're able to handle the lines now. Take a team up over the hill in the morning."

"Alone?" asked Lane.

"Just to the summit. Ed Carlsen's up there, my uncle. He'll go over to the mines with you. Take twelve horses——"

A muffled yell came from somewhere outside.

"What's that?" demanded Lane.

"Oh, it sounds like Brod giving Nellie another licking. Last time, he used a club. Put her in bed for two months."

"That doesn't seem to be decent!"

McCracken lit a cigarette. "Huh! I'm not worrying about Brod's brats!"

Lane subsided. Another cry arose, sharper this time. Brod's voice roared. Lane, disgusted, tossed his fork into a plate of greasy stew, and arose from the table. He started pacing on the creaky floor.

"That's like the rest of this country. Sort of a wolf-pack outfit—tooth, fang, claw, club, and devil take the hindmost."

McCracken laughed. "Sunday-school people can't run freight-teams, mister. Rough work makes rough men."

Lane looked at him strangely. "You seemed to think otherwise when the wolf-pack was on your back."

"That was different. Give me an even break and I'll stand 'em all off."

Another yell came. Lane stormed to the door.

"Hey!" yelped McCracken. "Don't you know Brod? Think you can stop him?"

"I'm going to scout around."

Lane opened the door and peered out. Some distance away, he saw three square lights shining from the window of the Brod home, partially masked by bushes. Silhouettes moved in front of the lights. From the heavier part of the thicket came a cutting whack.

"I learn you to hank around der men," bawled Brod. "I learn you!"

Lane passed the doorway.

"Keep out of it," warned McCracken.

"I'll not take my ethics from this country," snapped the ironmaster, stepping out upon the uneven ground.

The door banged behind him.

Lane soon found himself in front of the Brod house, where he sensed the presence of various scared little Brod brats hiding behind trees. One wan little face gaped at him in the light from the nearby windows. He observed the dim form of the girl cringing close to the ground, while a mighty hand held her by the back of the neck and shook her up and down. In Brod's other hand was a riding-quirt.

"Oh, stop that," rasped Lane, disgusted.

Brod's giant form straightened. "So! We have a butt-in, when I dizipline my family."

"Well, there's no need to kill your family. Be decent."

Brod's sarcastic reply surprised him. "So-ho! A Daniel come to chudgment. Well!"

Suddenly the giant leaped out of the shadows. A club-like thing struck Lane a smashing blow. He saw a constellation of sizzling flashes, and then, for a moment, his mind was completely b l a n k. When the haze cleared he found himself sprawling on hard ground, with Brod returning to the beaten girl.

Lane rose, shook off his numbness, and cast about for a stick, a club, a rock, anything. He reached into a clump of damp ground-ivy. A soft hand touched his shoulder.

"No, whispered Marian. "Please!" She patted his arm. "I know; I understand; but you can't help now. Stay away, please."

"It's criminal," he maintained.

"I know. He doesn't understand his own strength. But keep out of it. Please!"

Lane grunted unwilling agreement. He watched Brod leave the stricken girl and slam into his own house, banging the door. The quick flash of light shone for an instant on the victim in the brush. He saw Marian approach her and lift her head; and then came whispers and disconnected little phrases from the shadows. Once Marian's voice came clearly, "No! Run-

ning away would only make things worse. Not that."

Lane saw the door open again. A thin woman came forth cautiously, Nellie's mother. She arrived in the brush, and then the scared little Brod brats flitted in like shadowy gnomes from the black forest.

"And now I've cut a pretty figure!" muttered Lane ruefully.

He turned away and returned to the storekeeper's kitchen. McCracken stood in the open doorway. He grinned. "Welcome home! I thought I was going to lose another driver."

"Not yet," snapped Lane. "My career seems to be only starting."

IV

NEXT morning Lane started out with his team. A light snow had fallen. Trees and road were powdered with white, and the sky was slate gray.

"There may be more snow," said McCracken, looking up weather-wise. "Keep to the road. You can't miss it. Lay off four horses at the top of the grade."

Lane climbed to the seat of the great wagon, nodded, grasped the jerk-line, brought the ears of twelve horses up to alert attention, wound his whip-lash deftly around the stock, snapped back the brake with his booted foot, and bravely started his half-laden wagon up the long grade. The wagon swayed like a creaking ship as it labored over the rough ground.

Lane climbed. At length he rested the horses at the top of a knoll. He walked away from them and selected a level spot where a sapling stood, less thas three feet high; and then, solemnly, he jumped over it. He did it again and again, somewhat heavily, but without any failures. He returned to the wagon, flexing his arms and whistling blithely.

The outfit rumbled past an old miner's cabin and into another green forest. Snow fell. Flakes fine as lace soon blurred the leading horses from Lane's vision, but they knew their business and their bells tinkled cheerily ahead. The wagon climbed. The world became a place of motionless green and flurrying white. He went onward, through long hours of it. Noon passed. The snow deepened. The outfit creaked past gorges and canyons. Lane walked to keep warm, while his eyes watched the great six-inch tires crushing their tracks into the snow.

The team halted suddenly. Lane clucked. They would not go. Lane, curious, plunged ahead to the leaders, whose nostrils blew little clouds of steam toward something on the ground in front of them.

A slouchy fellow in patched gray lay

across the white trail. His outlines were starting to merge with the carpet of snow. His legs, in cowhide boots, were sprawled apart grotesquely. His grimy face was too white. Lane bent over him. "Alive. Dead drunk."

He carried the fellow to the wagon, shook him, thumped him, beat him, rolled him, rubbed him, wrapped him in a blanket, and at last compelled his bleary blue eyes to open. The eyes glinted suspiciously. They were sharp and shrewd. The man sat up in the wagon-bed. He was an illy-nourished creature with sunken cheeks, bony jaw and stubbly beard.

Finally he spoke. "Who the hell are you?"

"Lane. Teamster. Picked you up on the road."

The stranger was still suspicious. "Well, don't you try nothin' with me. Do you know who I am?"

Lane answered whimsically, "Oh, one of the menagerie, I guess!"

"Menagerie? Gawd, no! Not that!"

"You're safe enough. Where do you want to go?"

"You nemmine. You keep drivin' up the grade, see?"

Lane saw that the man's hand had stolen near the butt of a big revolver behind his hip pocket. Lane took the hint. The wagon labored onward, creaking over slabs of granite. The outfit climbed high and reached a level place. The snow quit falling. The passenger became more gracious.

"Whoa! I'll stop here. Thanks, stranger."

"Keep sober," advised Lane.

"Sober, hell! There's too much moonshine in this country, mister. S'long."

The fellow grinned, waved his hand, and vanished around a rock-ledge whose base was quilted in snow. Lane proceeded. A cutting wind began to blow away the clouds and bring blue sky again. He shivered under his heavy coat. In time he arrived at the rocky summit, a bleak wind-

swept pass where loose snow leaped and played. A log-cabin and a horse-shed stood beside the road. Lane put up his animals and found a welcome at the cabin. After supper he told his story, at the fireplace.

"Who was that fellow?" he asked, at the end.

Ed Carlsen, a wrinkle-faced elderly person with twinkling eyes, was seated smoking a corncob at the darkening window. It was starlit dusk.

"That's Joe Rambo. He's our crime-wave. Rustles cattle, makes moonshine, steals flour, groceries, settin' hens, or what have you. Been to the penitentiary three-four times. It didn't do much good."

"He looked hungry."

"Yep. Joe's findin' slim pickin's. Now, if I was a road-agent, I'd go where business was better; but I guess he ain't got much ambition.

"Is he a fugitive?"

"M-m-m. Sometimes he is and sometimes he ain't."

"Dangerous?"

"Sorter. He lets the freight-wagons alone, though. Mebbe he thinks they've got troubles enough."

A gust of wind shook the house. Lane, looking past Carlsen, observed that it was perched where it could look out upon the desert for countless miles. He saw the lights of a mine-settlement glimmering far below him, under a barren mountain range more than twenty miles away.

"What's to be the end of the struggle?" he asked.

"I dunno. Brod wins, I guess. McCracken can't keep it up much longer."

"How does he do it now?"

"Nerve," said Carlsen, in a cloud of pipe-smoke. "The bank's after him, Brod's after him, and shippers are swearin' because of the freight he's lost for 'em."

Lane warmed his back at the roaring fire.

"The average man would quit," he observed.

"Quit? No, sir! Would you? He's in the right, ain't he? Mebbe he wants to quit, I dunno; but there's somethin' in every man that makes him fight to the last ditch when he's put upon. Darn it, the kid can't quit! I wouldn't let him. You wouldn't let him."

Lane noticed the keenness of Carlsen's blue eyes, as he continued shrewdly, "He's got to depend on you and me. Now, you look like a pretty steady man. Mebbe you're what we've been lookin' for."

Lane's mind whimsically harked back to his forges and to the throng of workmen who came and went at the call of his foundry-whistle. He smiled as he watched the firelight play on the wrinkled face of the old fellow, who was playing his little game as earnestly as ever Thomas Lane with all his forges.

"I hope I'll make good," said Lane sincerely, drawing away from the fire, which threw his black shadow grotesquely on bare wooden walls.

Carlsen grunted and spat in the flame.

"M'yeh. The big thing is, how long will you stick?"

"I'm here for about two months."

"All right. But I want to warn you, mister, that anybody who would turn down that kid is a dirty skunk."

Lane stared. The fire crackled. A flurry of snow pattered on the window-pane.

"Explain that."

"I dunno. You look right to me; but the kid says he's afraid of you somewhere."

"How?"

"I dunno. He didn't say. He said he liked you but he wasn't quite sure he had you. Mister, if you gave me your word that you'd stand by the kid, I'd feel a lot easier."

"Well, I could not take any man's pay without being loyal."

Carlsen arose and grasped Lane's hand.

"Thanks. I guess you're white. The kid just didn't understand. Help him. Stand by him. Don't cross him. Soothe him. Mebbe he'll have a fightin' chance. He's been mighty put upon. He's been double-crossed and tricked and trimmed——"

There was a rumbling outside. Bells jingled. Carlsen stepped to the door and threw it open, making the house icy-cold in an instant. Beyond Carlsen, Lane could see a lantern's light flicker on the broad backs and lowered heads of many horses hitched to a big wagon piled high with goods. Two men were with the lantern.

"The Jennings brothers," remarked Carlsen. "Used to be our men. A sample."

He slammed the door.

The door reopened. One of the Lanky Jennings clan appeared—Lane's original guide—showing a propitiating grin on his scrawny face.

"Kin we come in? It's cold!"

"No," roared Carlsen. "You turncoat! Get out."

"But—Herman Brod owns this shanty, too."

"Well, *you* don't. Get out."

The slouchy fellow was stumped. He stood on one foot and then the other. He looked at Lane.

"It's a long ways down the grade, mister. It's cold."

"I hope you freeze," said Carlsen, uncharitably.

Jennings's deference turned to hostility.

"Freeze, hey? All right! I gotta rifle in that there wagon. I'll pump shells into this here shanty till I burn your dam' hides off. Freeze, eh? We'll see."

Carlsen reached back to his hip, Lane got in front of him.

"Enough," growled Lane. "You people will commit murder yet."

"Suits me," snarled Carlsen. "Skunks, rattlesnakes, coyotes and bobcats ought to be shot."

"Oh, stop it," snapped Lane. "It's cold outside. Let 'em sleep here."

Carlsen slowly began to sheathe his half-drawn revolver.

"Charitable, ain't you?" he commented.

"It's time somebody was charitable in this country."

"Well, all right. But keep 'em over in that corner. Otherwise there'll be accidents."

The Jennings brothers brought their blankets and bunked down. The night passed quietly. Sometimes Lane woke and caught the sour smell of bad whisky and stale tobacco, while cold winds raged outside; but he slept fairly well, and at dawn he and Carlsen took the long descent into the desert while the Brod outfit went the other way.

Lane kept his feet on the brake for twelve cold, sunny, sagebrush miles down an almost interminable slope.

"Nothing happened last night, you see," he remarked.

"Huh!" grunted Carlsen, reaching down and holding something in his gloved paw. "Here's your watch!"

"My watch?"

"Yep. Bill Jennings got into your pockets while you was sleepin'. He dropped it while he still had his brains."

"Oh!"

Lane looked over a sagebrush plateau sloping down toward range after range of bare hills, tinged with pinks, blue, purples, reds or streaky whites, all flashing in the morning sun.

"A hell of a country," he exploded. "A hell of a country, and yet it ought to breed men."

The wagon lumbered onward for half a mile.

"Have you seen the muscle on Herman Brod?" suggested Carlsen.

The wagon crossed a stony dry-wash. The horses heaved in the collars.

"I said men, not beef," qualified Lane.

The wagon passed a flat mesa and swayed along the side of a canyon whose distant bottom seemed to offer nothing better than rock, brush and eternal silence.

"Gotta have beef in this country," grunted Carlsen.

Lane jockeyed his team down a rocky grade, over a flat hillock, and around a sharp turn. The well-drilled horses went straight ahead and then swung inward just as the wagon-wheels took the curve.

"I see you admire Brod," remarked Lane.

The wagon went down another slope through a patch of smelly greasewood, and then turned again, almost at the mouth of an old abandoned prospect-hole whose dirt was falling to dust at the shaft-entrance. Carlsen lit his pipe and studied the backs of the horses.

"Got to," he admitted finally. "I've got brains; the kid's got brains; and yet Brod's got us licked, with all our brains. He can whip people into doin' what he wants—such as burnin' wagons. I can't. I've got the brains but not the beef. See?"

"Yes," sighed Lane. "I see."

He left Carlsen at the desert mines. Carlsen was commissioned to wander around and drum up business, if possible. Lane collected ore—a meagre cargo—and started for home. Two evenings later he returned down the long grade into the settlement.

He reached his barn after dark. Snow on the ground reflected the dim lustre of a quarter-moon. He unhitched his animals, led them to their stalls, and fed them, in the light from two dim lanterns on pegs. One Abe Bullard, a hobo hostler, helped him. McCracken was not present.

"He's had some grief," announced Bullard cheerily.

"More?"

"Yep. Flivver's gone. Dynamite. A stick was laid right on top of the engine, tied to a spark-plug. When Harry cranked 'er, she cracked the engine pretty near in

two. Almost knocked Harry's head off with the radiator. He's wild."

"That's persecution. Who did it?"

"Nobody knows."

"Like the rest of it," grunted Lane, starting to wash his hands in icy water from a pump just behind the door.

He looked toward the lights of various houses, peeping among the trees. Treacherous place! Dangerous hamlet! Was it worth while to stay here? He slowly dried his numbed hands on a dirty crash towel, and started toward the kitchen behind the store.

"But I've got to stick," he muttered. "Besides, it's interesting."

He saw a girl's familiar figure in a tailored suit, passing in front of the sorry light of the store and turning the corner almost in his path. She halted.

"Hello! Back from the desert!"

"Yes."

"How do you like it?"

"Teaming? Very well. It's good exercise."

"Sitting on a wagon-seat?"

"No. Walking up the grades. Carrying water. Grooming horses. Jumping over fences and little trees."

In the faint light he saw her lips suddenly part in the slight oval of a smile, but her eyes regarded him seriously.

"You *are* earnest."

Lane admitted to a queer sensation of magnetism, but he shook it off.

"I'm getting what I came for. If I wasn't, I'd go home."

She turned away. The shadows crossed her profile.

"Strange. A man like you doesn't usually——"

"I know, but they ought to. I'm glad I've been earnest."

She smiled again. Then, over her shoulder, "But don't be too earnest, please. Stay normal. For pity's sake, stay normal."

She disappeared. He stared into the darkness and then he slowly went to his belated dinner, wondering just what she meant.

He was still thinking about it when he went to the barn again. He saw that all was well with his horses, noted the absence of McCracken, and plodded toward his vacant shack, with his bedding over his shoulder. He cut cross country, behind the store. He walked past a small pine-grove which brushed his face and came to a picket fence in front of a house whose lights glinted through the myriad bars of old-fashioned shutters. He noticed that this was where Marian boarded. Like a culprit he turned away.

Suddenly a voice arose from within the house. The high-pitched, anguished tones penetrated boards and window-panes.

"Marian! Marian! My God, I love you, I love you. Marian! You're all I've got in the world to live for. You're all I've got to fight for."

There was silence. Then, "They're wrecking me—ruining me. Tell me—tell me you'll stay with me—stand by me—right to the end. Marian, if you ever went back on me, I'd kill myself. Look at me, Marian. Speak—speak——"

Lane tripped on a creeping ivy.

"Damn!" he exploded.

V

LANE went next morning to the little wooded lake above the town. He didn't exactly expect to find Marian there; he wasn't sure he wanted to see her anyhow; but the events of the evening before had filled him with curiosity. Naturally.

It was Saturday. She was there, perched on a big rock just at the shore's edge, with its base sunk in gray-white ice. Alongside her were papers.

"Examinations," she explained. "I sought solitude."

"Oh. Perhaps I'm intruding."

"No. Better stay. I may put you to work." She held up a paper, a horrible scrawl. "Some of the children are very backward."

Lane sat on a smaller rock alongside her.

"Well, why not? Look at their environment."

Her blue eyes studied him. "Do you sympathize with these people, Mr. Lane?"

Lane looked at a log half-embedded in the ice.

"No. I'm afraid not. Of course I pity Nellie Brod. Yes. And young McCracken."

"And yourself?"

He looked up and smiled lazily.

"Why should I? I've suffered, yes, but I can shut the whole sorry mess from my vision whenever I like."

"I've wondered why you haven't."

"Several reasons. I can't abandon McCracken. I'll not be scared out of any country. I've been knocked around. I resent being knocked around."

She studied his stocky corduroyed figure, and the round face with the calm eyes and the squared jaw kept scrupulously shaven. She saw many lines on his face; lines of sun, wind and experience, not of decay. The eyes under the high brow seemed to possess the most, as if they had peered into many visions.

"I'd be sorry if you were aroused," she remarked. "You're too powerful. Your weight would tip the balance. I cannot judge these people; or, rather, I'm not sure of my judgments!"

Lane shot his question suddenly. "Don't you feel for Harry?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I do. I pity him so much that I could never oppose him." He stared at her for a moment. "In anything," he concluded.

He turned and slid a pebble over the ice. It didn't go far. He arose and threw another. He skidded one at last to the farthest end of the lake. Marian laughed.

"You boy!"

He stiffened, stood poised with stone in hand and arm extended, looking at her inquiringly. Then, "Why do your eyes remind me of lilacs?"

She gasped. "Well—that doesn't sound much like *you!*"

"No, no; you're right. I'm a sedate business man. Excuse me."

She clenched her hands under her chin and regarded him, sitting like a demure little judge shrouded in gray-green-blue, with a wisp of gold under the gray tam-o'-shanter.

"You haven't been around women very much, have you?"

"Oh, sometimes." He slid another stone across the ice. "Their charms scare me. Aggressive charms—overwhelming charms—go-and-get-'em—charms—perfume, powder, silk, satin, small-talk and glitter, on the job every minute, trying to dazzle you, stun you, hang your hide on the wall—and then go on to something else."

"You must be speaking about society. Tell me more!"

"I don't know. Honestly. It's like a merry-go-round. You know how the animals come around in front of you—the black horse, the white one, the yellow one, the golden chariot, the colored pig, the brown bear, the pink unicorn. Well, that's it. There's a lot of color and movement, but I like to go back to the office."

The rocks and tree-groves on the opposite shore caught the rippling echo of her laugh. Lane noted a movement on the pathway at the turn of the lake. McCracken, in the usual overalls and laced boots strode toward him. The young fellow grinned cheerfully, but Lane noted shrewd eyes under the broad brim of his hat.

"Been looking for you," announced McCracken. "Folks said you were up this way. You'll have to go down to the Santa Fe right away. Got a load. Take your lay-over some other day."

"All right," agreed Lane.

McCracken smiled at Marian. "Examinations? Yeh. He been helping you any?"

"Not yet. You didn't give him a chance."

Lane was alert to see if Marian's expression changed when she regarded McCracken. It didn't.

"Oh. Well, let's go," said McCracken, to Lane, waving a hand to the girl. "See you later in the day, Marian."

McCracken led the way over wet creepers and roots in the muddy path downhill. In a fern-covered clearing he let Lane catch up with him.

"Are you a friend of mine?" inquired McCracken.

"How could I be otherwise, considering?"

"I dunno. Depends on what friend means."

Lane gazed beyond leafy boughs to where the distant settlement lay amid its meadows and woods.

"I've promised to stand by you. I'm forty. Nearly middle-aged. Youth belongs to youth."

McCracken nodded cheerily. "I thought it might be that way. Thanks."

They went down toward the sawmill. Lane found himself in the perverse mood to offer a few grimly jocular remarks.

"Hammering wins. I guess seventy per cent. of all women marry men they don't really want, while seventy per cent. of the men get the women they do want. The man has the right of choice. He has the strengtth to persist. Sooner or later she gives in."

"I guess that's right," agreed McCracken.

"Yes. The man pleads and coaxes till the woman is worn down. Tenacity gets the girl."

"You really think so?" eagerly.

"Damn it, yes; how else can so many fine women marry fool men?"

McCracken laughed. "You're all right, even if you are kidding me," he said, slapping Lane on the shoulder.

Lane silently got his team out. He drove down the long road toward the railroad station, arriving after dusk, laying his cargo aboard for a quick return in the morning. The railroad colony—a track, a siding, a platform, a shed, three houses, and a decrepit general store—managed to furnish bed and board. At dawn a pas-

senger train stopped. It dropped three citified-looking passengers.

"Bill-collectors, I guess," observed the spectacled agent, as Lane climbed to the seat of his wagon. "Had one last week. McCracken staved him off. They say he's getting in mighty deep. Next thing mebbe the sheriff'll come with a writ. You better git your pay while you can."

"Thanks," said Lane, uncoiling his whip.

He drove back to the settlement and reported the incident. McCracken made no comment. Lane proceeded up the long grade. A lame horse and a broken spring delayed him, so he camped for the night on a knoll, reaching the summit just before noon. Carlsen was in the shanty. He helped fix the spring, and joined Lane on the wagon-seat where Lane mentioned recent happenings.

"I can't understand them bill-collectors," admitted Carlsen, as they went down the stiff grade toward the desert. "The kid's finances are beyond me."

The wagon toiled over a plain, crossed a dry lake, traversed a forest of gaunt yucca-palms, ascended a long canyon through a bare and rocky ridge, and came at dusk to a good-sized valley, still fifteen miles from their destination. Lane and Carlsen unhitched the horses and strung them along a picket-line behind the wagon, eating a hearty meal cooked in a frying-pan over dry sage-brush. They rolled up in their blankets early.

The night was clear and not too cold. The air was heavy with the pungent smell of greasewood, sage and chaparral. The munching of horses and the stamping of their hoofs were the only things to break the overpowering silence of the night. Lane found himself looking up toward millions of brilliant stars, sending their unwinking glare so persistently that he was forced to turn away.

He couldn't sleep. He arose and threw brush on the fire till it flared high. Wrapped in his blankets like an Indian, smoking pipe after pipe, he found himself wondering about Marian. Unusual girl, that. Quiet, sensible, graceful, very magnetic; deserving of a better environment. Was McCracken the man for her? Was he sane enough, gentle enough, durable enough? Did he have any deep underlying sympathies—any Lincolnian sweetness of soul—to atone for the defects? Lane shook his head. He remembered McCracken's attitude when poor Nellie Brod was beaten. Rather hard-hearted, that boy.

Lane snapped his thoughts away. Confound it, it was none of his business! He was out of it!

He looked at his watch. Midnight. He stared at the stars again. To the eastward he thought he caught a faint glint of light, and looked toward the distant hills, seeing nothing. He turned away. In time he dozed.

He awoke, hearing a palpitating noise that was strangely familiar. He sat up.

Three dark, fast-moving forms were outlined against the long platforms of the wagon, downing a fourth person. Some distance away from the wagon, Lane saw a motor-car approaching. Its twin lights flared on the chaparral. He recognized the wheezy four-cylinder engine. It was Brod's truck.

Lane jumped to his feet.

"Keep quiet," bawled a voice. "We ain't after you."

"Let Carlsen alone," commanded Lane.

"Aw, shut up!"

Lane thought he recognized the voice of a Jennings, but he sensed that they didn't want to be recognized. That gave him an idea. He stepped toward the dying fire and lifted some brush to heap upon it.

Two of the strangers rushed at him.

"Drop that," bawled one of them.

The other man grabbed Lane's left wrist.

"Keep out o' this. We ain't after you."

Lane knocked him down.

It surprised the ironmaster. It amazed him. His muscles, once flabby from years of office work, had struck like a hammer. His body, with half its paunch gone, felt like a thing of steel springs. He leaped

over the prostrate man, swung upon the other. He missed with the right, but lashed out with the left. His fist caught a jawbone and knocked the victim ten feet.

"Come on," he yelled exultingly. "Any more?"

He stormed down upon the fellow holding Carlsen. Carlsen was on the ground. Lane swung viciously upon the last enemy. The blow was wild. He tried again. The other man's fist struck his cheek. Lane delivered a fervid, rapturous wallop straight into the other's midriff. The man staggered, grunted and doubled up.

Lane marveled at himself. The ecstasy of health and power acted like wine upon him. He got the thrill of a schoolboy out of it. At forty! At forty!

"Hurrah!" he yelled.

Boots stamped behind him. He whirled, too late. A blow bruised his left jaw. Another caused strange noises in his right ear. Arms and legs twined around him. He exerted his glorious new strength. He managed to hurl his attackers away, but they came back. One of them got behind him and pinioned his arms. The man on the ground came to life, grabbing his boots. Lane struggled to keep his balance but toppled over.

He kicked and fought. Blows rained on him. Sharp pains assailed him. His strength began to wane. Madly he strove to whip up that fiery vigor again, but he began to breathe hard. Blows weakened him. Stars and fireworks danced in front of his eyes. Numbness seized him. His arms and legs refused to respond to his will. He felt dazed, stunned. Then came complete blankness.

He awoke to find himself up on the ground alongside a sage bush, some distance from the wagon. Carlsen was alongside him, unconscious.

"Licked!" groaned Lane.

He glared at the wagon. Men were lifting boxes and bales off it, piling them near the little campfire. In time, through the lacy overhanging bushes, he saw flames rise high; but the attackers kept out of sight till the fire died down. Then four men strode over to Lane and Carlsen. The fourth was the driver of the motor-truck.

"Why didn't you burn the wagon?" growled Lane.

"Oh, let McCracken keep it—till it's sold with the rest of his stuff. Somebody'll buy it cheap; it's a good wagon."

One of the men undid Lane's lashings, and he chafed his hands and stood stiffly.

"You cheap ruffians, do you expect to win for Herman Brod this way?"

"Yep. It's bein' done, mister! Right before your eyes. Presto, chango!"

Lane licked his battered lips. He spoke mildly. "Yes. My eyes are opened. I see what I'm forced to do. From now on, you'll have to fight me!"

"Haw-haw!" laughed the taller of the quartet. "Go ahead. Help yourself."

They turned and ran toward their motor-truck, whose engine began to clatter again. Lane bent over Carlsen, undid his lashings, and rubbed his face and hands. Carlsen finally opened his eyes. The motor-truck hummed far away when Carlsen sat up and looked around.

"Ruined," he whimpered.

"Rot," said Lane.

VI

LANE sped to the settlement and reported the matter to McCracken, who was shoeing a horse at his little forge in the woods behind the barn, near the edge of the tumbling river. The news staggered the younger man. He dropped his hammer and clenched his fists. His moistening eyes grew round, while his gash of a mouth sagged wide.

"My God, it's the end! They've busted me. I can't pay for that freight. The dirty sneaks, they've persecuted me ever since they started. I can't fight that gang. I'm only a poor, lonely kid—I'm only just a kid, trying to make a living."

He leaned against the barn wall and laid his head in his arm. His body shook with sobs. Lane didn't know exactly what to say.

"Well, he observed mildly, "you can't win your battle this way!"

McCracken whirled upon him. "Win? You fool, the battle's over."

"Not yet. Now I'm going to take a hand."

"You? What are you talking about?"

"Fighting! I'm going to knock Brod and all his crowd out of business."

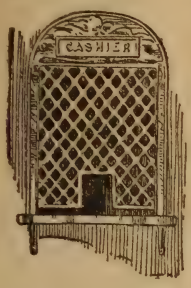
McCracken's eyes bulged.

"What can you do? Are you joshing me now?"

"No. What do I care for a few dol-

lars? It's an investment. For the good of the country."

Somehow Lane thrilled at the thought of another business tilt. He saw his program clearly. He had thought it all out.



He had decided on mass tactics, with horses, wagons and drivers as the pawns. Win? Surely! He realized, with a little regret, that he could annihilate a thousands Brods.

A wild gleam of hope appeared in McCracken's eyes, but, "You're kidding me!" he said. "Damn you, are you trying to make fun of me?"

"Not while my check-book holds out."

"My God, *you mean it!*"

McCracken grabbed Lane's hand with ferocious fervor.

"I see it. You're telling the truth. I can see it in your eyes. You're a friend, a *friend.* I thought there was something about you—you had more class than these other people—but I didn't dare to ask questions. Questions scare people. We had a burglar who escaped from the penitentiary last year. He was a fine fellow, but I got to asking too many questions, and he went away."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lane, enlightened.

"I didn't want to lose you. I needed you. I kept my mouth shut. And now I've got a friend. I'm glad you came. Who are you, mister? Where did you come from?"

"Oh, I'm on a vacation. That's all. Let it drop. Now, let's see your books. Let's find where we stand."

"You want to be partners?"

"Certainly. I invest the money; you operate. In time you can buy me out. I've faith in this country. It will grow. In a short time you can cancel all debts and start fresh. Could you ask any more?"

McCracken wrung Lane's hand. "No! Mister, you're a white man."

But Lane could make nothing of McCracken's "books," when he examined matters in a cubbyhole at the barn, alongside the hayloft. The only legible accounts were debts to a bank. McCracken gave a better oral summary:

"I've got two wagons, thirty horses, five men, a barn, some harness, two trailers, three old wagons I haven't used for years, and two hundred dollars cash. The burned freight was worth five hundred. I'm in the hole."

"All right. We'll have a hundred horses, eight wagons, sixteen men, and ten agents to drum up business."

"But there ain't enough business!"

"I know it. That's why we'll do it. We'll get into every corner. We'll clean up every crumb. They wanted fight. We'll give 'em fight."

McCracken scratched his head. "But it means a heavy loss."

"Certainly. But when the competitor is eliminated, you can shrink the outfit to its proper size again."

McCracken's long face changed to a grin. "That's brains. My gosh, if I'd only known who I hired!"

"I'm glad you didn't. You'd have tried to force events."

"Yep; that's right. But what'd be the difference? Right's right and wrong's wrong."

Lane let it go at that. He and Carlsen journeyed next day to the horse-marts of the nearest town. In ten days the first of the new draft-animals arrived, a clattering big herd behind two new wagons. The wagons bore eight husky men with their blankets and belongings. The procession rumbled down to the settlement at dusk. Herman Brod and his henchmen stared open-mouthed from the Brod barn.

A new flivver later brought five solicitors, selected by Lane.

"Get the freight," he instructed them. "Go into every mine and cross-road store. Promise service. We'll give it. Get the business."

Next morning the skies were dark. Light snow fell. The summit was far out of sight among gray clouds and white curtains. While new horses were being harnessed, by new men under the light of new lanterns, Lane swallowed a hasty breakfast in the kitchen behind the store, and then, pulling on his mittens, he started for the barn while the feathery snow moistened his cheeks.

Marian came around a turn, books under arms.

"My, but you're a stranger!" she reproached him halting.

He had quietly avoided her.

"I know." He nodded. "I've been busy."

She tried to read his face.

"Yes; I've heard of it. It was what I feared. I'm sorry. You are too powerful. You've changed the odds—completely."

"And do you regret that?" he asked gently.

"I think so. You've taken away the ele-

ment of chance. Nobody can work out his own salvation. It may be a mistake."

Lane considered.

"I don't quite get your viewpoint," he admitted at last. "Perhaps you think too deeply for me."

"No; I only care for them—through their children. I see their humanness. I cannot judge them."

"I think I understand," he conceded. "But look: I came here a stranger, seeking no trouble. I've been hammered and battered. Do you blame me?"

Her eyes were not harsh.

"No, no! They've treated you shamefully. But there are women and children to think about."

Lane hadn't given a thought to that. He frowned and stared at the hard ground, where flakes of white were melting into the brown and green.

"I'll try to soften that part of it," he decided. "There's work for Brod—when he behaves!"

She smiled and gave a quick little nod.

"I'm glad. I thought you were like that."

He gazed after her as she went through the grove and toward the Brod home. Then, thoughtfully, he went to the barn and took charge of his team. He swung them up the long grade, and drove to the summit despite heavier snows, arranging a

permanent guard in the house of the winds. There was no opposition from Brod. Lane had seven men with him.

WHY don't you quit driving?" inquired McCracken at the barn, when Lane had patrolled the long road for a week. "You don't have to do that."

Lane laughed. He was red-faced and tingling after a battle with a sleety gale.

"Man, I wouldn't quit for the world!"

"Huh! If I made my pile, you wouldn't see me bucking any snowdrifts. I'd get in a quilty bed and never show my head out of my boodwar all winter!"

"Yes," admitted Lane. "There always is a temptation to do that. Give me the flivver. I'm going to the railroad to bring up another salesman."

"Suit yourself."

Lane went out to crank the thing while McCracken regarded him somberly. But a ten-horse Brod outfit came lumbering forlornly down the road, empty except for two small ore-sacks, and McCracken smiled.

Lane returned from the railroad next noon. He halted his mud-spattered car at the barn and sought a belated meal at the store. He walked past the grove of elders and struck the road near the Brod barn, whose door was open and silent. Lane wondered what the enemy was thinking about it all.

As if in response, Herman Brod stalked around the corner, walking with hands in pockets, stooped over. He sighted Lane, and halted. So did Lane. Brod's truculent head lowered, he stared with glowering eyes, then deliberately walked into the smaller man's path. Brod's first words quavered with anger and anguish.

"So, you are the man who ruins me!"

"You've ruined yourself," contradicted Lane.

"Yah! Damn you—you take der bread from my mout—you bust my vreight line—you come here to smash my pisness—damn you!"

The giant's red face contorted. Words rushed to his mouth and choked each other. He spluttered. His body trembled. His powerful hands clenched.

Suddenly he leaped forward and clubbed downward at Lane, who jumped aside. The giant whirled and swung again. Lane guarded with a frantic arm, but the blow almost numbed him.

"Stop that," demanded Lane.

"Gott! Now I got you!"

Brod's enormous fist lashed out with a blow that would have knocked the smaller man silly. Lane was forced to dodge. He backed away. A small creeper caught his foot. He recovered his balance, but the mighty arms of Brod were about him, hugging like the coils of a boa-constrictor.

"Now!" sobbed Brod, intensely.

Lane, desperate, struck at him. The blow landed full on Brod's cheek, but the giant hardly noticed it. He lifted Lane and swung his head and shoulders outward, whirled him by the midriff toward the bare trunk of an oak tree, carrying the weight as though it were a feather.

Lane, with head literally reeling, saw the tree coming closer. He threw a protecting arm over his head.

"You maniac," he roared. "Stop it."

The tree revolved in crazy circles. Its

dizzy branches pointed hither and yon, toward all parts of a whirling gray sky. Suddenly it ceased motion. The leafy branches assumed a rigid quietude. The grip on Lane relaxed.

"Drop him," came the curt command of Carlsen, nearby.

Brod moved not a muscle.

"Drop him."

Lane, squirming around in his undignified position, saw the black muzzle of a rifle not ten feet away, pointing straight at Brod's head. Behind its sights, Carlsen's cold eyes peered from under a battered slouch hat.

Brod's hands loosened. Lane fell like a sack, upsidedown. He scrambled to his

feet while the giant, with his dirty old boots spread far apart, stared as if hypnotized into the rifle's dark tunnel.

"I guess we'll have to watch you," observed Carlsen.

Lane heard no reply, but he noticed Brod's enormous hands, now empty at his side, but more eloquent than any voice. They were twisting spasmodically, clenching, unclenching. Terrific hands, thought Lane, powerful hands, capable hands, worthy of a better business.

Carlsen eased down the rifle barrel, and spoke to Lane.

"What can we do with a fellow like that?"

Lane's mind was on those able hands. He spoke slowly. "There are other ways to handle him. I think I know the cure. Let him go."

There was a strained silence.

Brod glared at Lane. His eyes were bloodshot and watery, his stubbled face abnormally red. He tried to say something, raised his clenched fists, trembled, growled like an animal, tossed up his hands with a gesture of bewilderment, and lurched toward his house.

"Checkmate!" said Carlsen with satisfaction.

"Perhaps. I'm sorry," said Lane. "We'll see."

VII

LANE went to the railroad again next day in the flivver. He sent a telegram.

Three evenings later his rattling vehicle returned to the settlement and brought a passenger, a big, dark, keen-eyed man with clipped hair and blue city clothes of careless quality. His stature was lanky, his shoulders abnormally broad, his jaw square, his nose somewhat flat and his ears unusually large. He was one of Lane's bridge-foremen. He grinned as the flivver drew up to the McCracken barn.

"Classy dump," he remarked, appraising the settlement.

"Not exactly," admitted Lane, with a twinkle in his eye.

McCracken emerged from the barn and laid his booted foot on the flivver's running board. Lane made the introductions.

"McCracken, I want you to meet Larry Delaney. Sometimes he boxes."

McCracken's eyes widened. "Oh, Brod?"

"Yes. I can't handle him. Larry can. But keep it quiet."

"Go to it," agreed McCracken cheerfully. "Hope you kill him."

"No," contradicted Lane. "There's good in him—if it can be brought out."

"In Brod? That big bull? Well, mister, if you've come here to make cattle over again—" he bowed with sardonic humility —"very good, my lord!"

Lane looked at McCracken for a silent moment. Then he said, "You don't seem to understand. I want peace. Peace without malice. Let's end this thing."

McCracken shrugged as he turned away. "Oh, all right; you've got the power."

Lane stared after him.

"Scrappy hick, ain't he?" commented Larry Delaney. "Who is he?"

"My partner in the freighting business."

"That guy? You've got a funny taste in partners all of a sudden, boss."

Lane laughed. "Come on, Larry. I'll show you where we eat."

Larry descended from the car and lit a big cigar. He set his fedora hat down

over his left forehead, stared haughtily at barns, houses, trees and manure-piles, rolled the cigar in his mouth, shrugged, and followed his boss toward the awful provender in the kitchen at the back of the store. The dusk made the outlines of all objects indistinct, but Lane happened to notice the form of Brod walking among the trees toward his house. Lane pointed toward his enormous back.

"That's the fellow. He wants to rule by knocking people down. When that idea is jolted out of him, he'll amount to something."

Larry sized up the distant figure. "Huh! You couldn't put class into that."

"He has a family. He has ability. He almost dominated the whole country. He's brutal, but he's a *man*. I want him."

"Oh, all right, boss; what's the program?"

Lane walked slowly and looked at the ground. "I'm not sure. I want to be careful. The only way to reach this man is through the physical, but I don't want him to have too much resentment. I want to talk to him afterward."

"Why not talk first?"

"Impossible."

"I get you. I've met them kind myself."

They went to the kitchen and ate their dubious meal. Later, Lane left Larry to his own devices, and studied McCracken's accounts in the lamplit office of the barn. Carlsen stayed with him. A tin alarm-clock on a dusty shelf ticked off an hour and more.

Lane began to be conscious of a faint medley of voices outside. Then came a bellow.

"Something's up," he exclaimed, feeling a queer alarm.

There was another ferocious roar.

Lane rushed outside, with Carlsen. Through the trees, looking toward Brod's barn, they could see dark figures scuffling in the dim lantern-light of the doorway. Lane passed the trees—and saw that Larry Delaney and Herman Brod were engaged in ferocious battle. He ran up to a lounger.

"Who started this?"

"That there stranger. He seen Brod at the barn door and he sez, 'I gotta do this some time, so it might as well be now.' And then—biff!"

"Damn Larry!" exploded Lane.

He shoved through the watchers, halting at the edge of the fracas. He didn't quite know what to do about it. To his surprise, Brod was half whipped already!

The man was breathing great gulps of air which roared deep in his throat. His eyes were panicky, his mouth a red gash. His outward violence alone was unimpaired. His blows were terrific, cutting the air like flails, swinging down so fast that the arms seemed flashes of light, like wheel-spokes turning in the sunlight—and just about as effective. Larry, grinning cheerfully, parried the whirling arms and hit straight from the shoulder, landing on his mark every time. It happened over and over again. Lane marveled. Larry noticed him.

"Easy," panted Larry, out of the side of his mouth. "Strong, but no science. Look——"

Larry braced his feet, and straightened his powerful body, holding his left arm horizontally at a point six inches in front of and across his forehead. Brod, bawling and sobbing with rage, clubbed downward with his fists, madly, stupidly, striving to batter down the flexible forearm which yielded at each blow, sprang back into position.

Suddenly Larry's unoccupied right arm leveled itself. It lashed straight forward. It stopped the heavier Brod in his tracks. Crack!

"No brains," explained Larry. "He thinks he's drivin' nails."

The dazed giant charged again, stubbornly, shaking his head like a bull. Larry stepped aside, delivering a short-arm jolt. It smashed into the bridge of Brod's nose. Brod stopped. His hands dropped to his side. He was numb and bewildered, very much like a big animal standing at bay.

"That's enough," Lane commanded Larry.

The latter obeyed, with a nod.

Brod stood glowering, feet spread apart, head hung forward, cheeks raw, mouth bleeding. His great chest heaved like a bellows. His eyes were wide and stricken; beyond rage, staring at the ground.

"Brod," said Lane soothingly.

The panting giant's wild eyes glared at him.

"Brod," repeated Lane.

Brod's fist clenched again. He took a

long and sobbing breath, but could not speak.

"Aw, talk up," coached Larry impatiently.

Lane held up a reproving hand, and spoke to Brod.

"Listen——"

"Gott!"

"It's all over now, Brod, all of it. Let's stop this fighting."

The giant's eyes narrowed. He drew another long breath. He tried to speak, but failed. Suddenly he threw up his helpless fists, shook them toward the dark sky, turned, and lurched away like a drunken man.

Lane stared after him despairingly, and another figure came into his vision. It was Marian, among the further trees, partly hidden in shadow. Somehow he admitted to a sense of shame. Suddenly he wanted to explain, was eager to explain. He started away from the barn, and she permitted him to go nearer. Though it was dark, he could visualize the expression on her face, especially the eyes; not reproachful but very thoughtful. He felt it when he heard her low voice.

"I'm sorry!"

"I am, too. But what else could I do?"

"I know, I'm not criticizing; but I wish this awful business was over. Somehow I'm afraid of it."

Lane could think of no appropriate reply. Something cold struck his face gently. She held up her hand.

"It's snowing again. I'll have to go in."

"Better go," he agreed absently. "You'll catch cold."

He noticed that stealthy flakes were falling among the trees and flashing like jewels in the light of the Brod barn. Suddenly he heard a sharp crack from somewhere beyond the trees, then silence, then a woman's muffled cry.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

But Marian had started away.

"Wait," he pleaded.

He saw her going through the woods toward Brod's house. Brod's house!

"Wait," he yelled. "That big brute may be running amuck with a gun."

Her voice came back, "No! It's worse than that."

A chill struck him. He peered through the blur of snowflakes toward the dim lights beyond the trees. His heart beat faster. So that was what she had feared all along. The man couldn't stand defeat!

"Great heavens!" groaned Lane. "I couldn't have foreseen that."

He did not question Marian's judgment. Somehow he felt that she was right. Brod had gone off his head—lost heart, succumbed to despair—and yet there was a slight chance that she might have guessed wrong. He pictured Marian confronting such a demoniac figure as Brod might be.

"No," he gasped.

He ran like a deer through the woods, and approached the Brod home. Other figures were already nearing the gate. Windows were alight; voices were calling; a youngster bawled; a neighboring door came open and slammed shut. He leaped the brushy hedge at the front of the yard, and entered into a musty little parlor lit by a table-lamp, warm in the cozy glow from a log fire. An aged clock ticked with stately leisure, indifferent to human emotions.

Disturbing sounds came from a back room. He passed a dark kitchen where an enormous long table stood with chairs around it. He seemed to feel the presence of Brod brats nearby; subdued little forms whimpering in the darkness. He walked to the rear room, but halted at the threshold.

There was no mistaking what had happened.

The nearby lamp threw its light on dazed little youngsters in a corner. One still sucked a stick of candy while he sobbed uncertainly. A smaller girl showed tears on the dirt of her cheeks. The slim body of Nellie Brod was slanted across an ancient hair-sofa, racking so that her sleazy black clothes seemed ready to fall apart. Mrs. Brod was in a battered rocker, her head forward in her bent arm. Marian was patting her shoulder.

"So that's it," groaned Lane.

There were objects in the further corner, but he did not let himself see them. He turned away and left the room. He couldn't stand it. Perspiration oozed out over him. His hands shook. He halted in the semi-dark kitchen and clutched the back of a chair. Figures passed him but he did not notice. He saw the light from the doorway reflect on the table's oilcloth cover, where dishes were laid neatly at each place, surrounded by cutlery. Dishes —mouths to feed—a horde to feed! Who would feed them now?"

"My God!" he whimpered, aghast.

Marian appeared in the doorway, but for once he did not want to face her. He turned his back deliberately. She hesitated and then she crossed the floor and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Nobody blames you," she said gently.

His hand gripped the chair tighter. "No; nobody but myself!"

"I know; but I wouldn't feel that way. Who could foretell this?"

Lane faced her at last, speaking with savage bitterness. "I'm a fool. A fool who thought he could adjust the affairs of his fellowmen—a god from the machine—a blind man giving judgment. Hell! This man, Brod, had children to feed."

She was silent. Then, "But you were provoked."

He gasped with astonishment. She was defending him to himself.

"I thank you, Marian, but I'm not converted. I took the wrong side."

"No!"

"Yes; wrong. McCracken's young. He has nobody but himself. He could afford to lose. But Brod had children to feed. He was brutal, ignorant, stupid, unfair—I'll grant all that—but—" Lane waved a tired hand toward the empty dishes, "who can make up for that?"

She waited. He stared out of the window, where snowflakes fell silently against the dark pane. He tried to weigh his exact guilt. The thing escaped him, but above all else he saw that the real sufferers were these noisy, helpless folks whimpering in the next room. Who could help them now? There was only one person. Thomas Lane.

"I'll have to provide for this crowd," he cried helplessly. "Damn it, there's no other way!"

She made no reply, but he felt her approving touch on his arm. He trembled slightly. Suddenly he captured her hand, clutched it, held to it frantically as if to crush it. He started to say something, and then as suddenly shoved it away as if it burned. He turned and strode out of the door.

He marched to the side of the house, rent by emotions whose vehemence startled him. His heart was thumping. His fists were clenched. He paced up and down in brush where a garden should have been. There was wailing within the lighted window. White glints of snow drifted outside the frosted pane. He never noticed them. He hardly noted the arrival of McCracken, who went toward the front door.

There were voices over there. Then came McCracken's high-pitched tones, "What do we care? The country's better off without him."

Marian's voice came, "Where did Mr. Lane go?"

"I don't know. Never mind him, come away!"

There was more subdued talk. Then, "Marian, Marian, you don't seem to pay much attention to me lately. What's the matter with you? Hey? What's the matter?"

"Please!" appealed Marian.

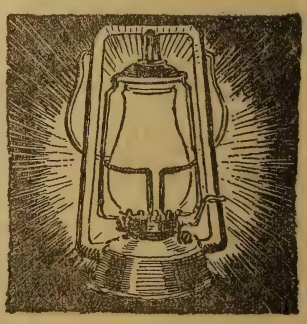
"Aw, don't take that attitude. Marian, if you only knew how much I loved you ——"

Lane kicked an empty tomato-can from underfoot. He kicked it clear over the fence.

VIII

HEAVY snows fell that night. Strong winds blew next morning. The air was filled with spindrift, scudding down from the hills. Houses were covered with restless white roofs which piled high, toppled over, and swept themselves off.

Lane arose before dawn. He took a short-cut amid swaying white trees, bucking the gale until the chest of his great-coat was glistening. He pushed open the door of his barn, bringing cold air down the line of stalls before he could shove it shut. He observed that McCracken was working with three men under the eerie light of a lantern. Several horses were already harnessed.



"Going out today?" asked Lane.

"Sure. This ain't much of a storm. We're sending a ten-horse team down to the railroad, and then back up the grade. Bill Hawkins will go with them."

Hawkins drove the special wagon which usually ran to the railroad from the little lumber-mill above town. He always had this short run; never the longer one into the desert. Lane felt slightly piqued.

"How about the lumber-mill?"

"Shut down. You can lay off for a time, if you want."

"Perhaps I'd better. There's much to

be done. We'll lay off these extra wagons and men. The war is over."

McCracken banged a currycomb on a stall-top.

"Yep. You're right. The war's over."

"Some of it," qualified Lane. "We'll have to deal with the Brods."

"As how?" sharply.

"I don't know. They own teams. Why not keep them as future reserves? They're local. They're doing nothing now. That's waste."

"Something in that. We can get 'em cheap."

"Perhaps we'll consolidate them."

McCracken stiffened. "Bring *them* into partnership?"

"Perhaps; I'm not sure yet."

"Neither am I," grunted McCracken, turning away.

Lane did not feel qualified to pursue the subject. He felt tired, disillusioned and shaken by the events of the night before. He tried to make himself useful at the barn, but could not, so he plunged through snowdrifts to the storekeeper's warm kitchen, seeking breakfast.

Larry Delaney was there, enjoying himself in an atmosphere of strong coffee and heat from a roaring stove. Lane slumped into a chair.

"'S'matter?" asked Larry, mouth filled with hot-cakes.

Lane stared at the stained blue-white oilcloth on the table.

"I don't know. Perhaps I've lost interest. I tried to regulate the affairs of my neighbors—but that's out of my line, I guess."

"It was a flop," translated Larry.

"Yes. A flop." Lane arose and lifted the coffee-pot off the stove. "I think you'd better go home, Larry. It's not your fault. You did a good job, a splendid job. I'll remember it, but we'd both better get out. I'll follow you in a week or two. As soon as I wind up this affair."

"Suits me," said Larry. "The quicker I leave this dump, the better."

"You can go on the wagon this morning."

"Fine!"

Lane regarded the big pugilist closely. So Larry, too, was shaken. That hit Lane harder than anything else.

Larry left on the wagon, which soon disappeared among the trees, just as the sun came out. The winds began to die down. Carlsen, muffled to the eyes in a brown coat, started in a two-horse buckboard up the big grade, hoping to reach the desert and call in the extra men.

A traveling parson arrived in a small car early in the afternoon. Lane learned that one of the Jennings brothers had ridden horseback through the storms of the night to summon him. Lane wandered about, doing nothing.

He saw three men in Sunday clothes enter the Brod barn, hitching four horses to a big freight-wagon. He saw the wagon toil through the forest to the Brod home, strangely quiet amid its whitened vines and bushes. At length he observed the little preacher emerge briskly from the house, followed by a subdued retinue; Mrs. Brod in black weeping; Nellie Brod in dark blue walking with Marian; a gangling Brod youth whose neck squirmed in a white collar; awed Brod brats of various sizes, offensively clean; and finally the Jennings brothers and two other men, bearing a yellow box. The wagon started up the hill, the little procession followed, and then it was lost to sight beyond the trees.

McCracken approached Lane, walking with brisk steps.

"Aw, don't take it so solemn. Cheer up. He was only a big bum."

"Bums sometimes leave families," Lane reminded him.

"Oh. Them? Shucks. They'll get along somehow. They didn't give a damn about me when I was down. No, sir! Of course charity's charity; but there's a limit."

Lane nodded. "I understand. Still, there's a problem to be faced."

"Well, keep it away from me." Lane nodded again. "I may have to," he grunted.

In time the mourners returned, in scattered groups. Marian came through the trees and brought a little girl in a patched white dress. She saw Lane and towed the youngster toward him. He lifted his hat politely.

"It's over," he remarked.

"Yes. Now I hope there will be peace."

"Peace, yes. But what will happen to the Brods?"

"They do not know. How can they? They're only the victims. Mrs. Brod has no resources. Their money was all used up. I feel helpless."

Suddenly Marian reached behind her and lifted the little youngster, holding it straight in front of him.

"See it," she appealed. "Look at it."

To his amazement he beheld a beautiful child with dark hair, a little button of a

mouth, and the pink complexion of a fresh peach. A brat? No; a glorious little thing.

"Its face is washed," he decided uncomfortably. "That does make a difference."

"Ah, yes; but they have souls. I know; I've watched them! There's Nellie, passionately fond of music. There's Johnny, who loves engines. There's William, with the making of an artist. There's Jane, who loves every flower and leaf. There's Anna, a wonderful little housewife——"

"There's Marian," he rallied gently, "a wonderful little advocate."

She smiled slightly, but her eyes were questioning. Again he thought of lilacs, as in a sudden flash of springtime, as if he could actually smell them; but the vision passed instantly, though its wistful thoughts remained, making him vaguely uneasy. Springtime? No; he had passed beyond.

He spoke in a voice slightly husky. "You talk as though you were trying to sell this family to me."

"I am," she admitted, point blank. "Who else can I go to? Who else has the power to help? And who is there but me to speak for these poor people?"

He stared in surprise. He felt compelled to stretch forth a slow, tentative hand, to lay it on her shoulder gently, very gently, lest he crush something, he didn't know just what.

"You can sell them," he concluded slowly. "But it's not necessary. I've decided already."

She gave a little nod of satisfaction. He let his hand fall.

"I'm glad we have you here," she admitted.

Lane heard gravel crunch beside him. McCracken approached. He heard Marian's last words. He halted, looked at her, looked at Lane and then at Marian again.

"Yep," he agreed, a trifle sullenly. "It's good we've got him. He's some manager!"

"Rot!" snapped Lane impatiently.

He chose to turn and stride away. Marian watched him. She appraised his close-knit body, the contour of his smooth-shaven jaw, and, most of all, the spring in his walk as he swung along the woodland path.

"Fine looking fellow, isn't he?" said Marian absently.

McCracken's mouth tensed, but he said, "Yep; fine fellow, too!"

Next noon a freight-wagon and four men passed, outward-bound, their employment ended. The wagons were rented. The men—though McCracken never learned it—were Lane's own solicitors,

now on their way back to their usual work. McCracken, in his motor, brought two ex-teamsters to the railroad three evenings later. He returned next morning. At noon a second wagon came down the grade and was laid off. Its horses were led out of the country that afternoon, behind a third wagon.

Lane visited Mrs. Brod. The faded little woman—English born—had no plans, possessed little money, and was dazed by the loss of the roaring giant who had controlled everything, even to the thinking-processes of the Brod household.

Lane groaned as he walked to the front gate.

"She's never had an idea of her own for twenty years. It's all up to me."

Marian came down the road, towing the usual collection of Brod kiddies. She nodded and halted at the fence. The youngsters scampered ahead, and Lane felt compelled to make a report.

"I haven't done anything yet. I want to be cautious. It's a matter of reconciling the factions. There are prejudices, you know."

"Yes, I know. That's the pity of it."

"I could give charity, but I don't want charity. I want them to pool their interests. I want everybody to make a living out of it."

She toyed with the whip-like stalk of a bare bush which stood straight out of a patch of soiled snow.

"Do you really think it can be done?" she questioned.

"I hope so. I want to leave soon. I'm ready to return to my own business."

"And you really want to go?"

He met her gaze squarely.

"Yes. There are some things I will always be glad to remember; more things I want to forget."

She looked past his shoulder, toward the woods.

"I'm sorry," she said, with a queer little

twist to her mouth. "I hope you will always remember me."

"Possibly you are one of the things I will try hardest to forget."

She looked at him soberly, with steadfast eyes. He noticed the delicate pink of her face; the usual color but just a shade deeper.

"I would be sorry if that were true."

He tried to puzzle it out. He caught several possible meanings, but couldn't choose between them, so he atoned by grasping her hand and giving it a little shake, man-fashion.

"Well, anyhow, there have been compensations."

He saw a third figure near him. McCracken again! McCracken was grinning, hands on hips, feet spread apart, registering jocular interest.

"Want to see you," said McCracken to Lane. "Any time you're ready."

Marian nodded and walked away.

"What is it?" asked Lane.

McCracken laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Want to take a team out tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

"All right. Go up to the lumber-mill, first thing in the morning. They're cleaning house. They've got a lot of sawdust and things they're selling cheap. Take it to the railroad."

"Certainly."

Next morning, while a bright sun flashed on the roofs of houses, Lane swung his ten-horse wagon up through the sloping meadows above town, pased the stark limbs of the Judas-tree at the top of the ridge, and rolled down the gentle grade that led toward the railroad settlement. The air was warm, springlike, just right. In his nostrils was the smell of the sunlit woods, mingled with the clean odor of sawdust and pineboards in the wagon. He began

to practice with his whip, cracking it with a deft wrist while the knowing old horses ambled along indifferently.

He thought of the settlement behind him, thought of its woes. Out here in the sunlight they seemed distant, shrunken, rather futile. He looked forward to the forges and the business tumult that he knew best. He longed for them. He felt physically and mentally fit now; ready for the fray. He intended to provide for the Brod crowd, of course, but the other local matters were hardly worth bothering about. Except Marian.

Marian! He could almost see her now among the woods that rolled past him.

He had come to understand that for every man there is some type of woman who can walk right into his mind and heart without an effort. He knew now that Marian was his type. Why? He did not know. She had never said or done anything brilliant or dramatic; she had merely been her quiet, friendly self, with eyes that reminded him of lilacs. But that was the pity of it; it made him wince. A child—twenty-two—springtime—just a young girl! It were better indeed that he go away. McCracken wouldn't do either, but that would work itself out. She'd probably get past him all right; the signs had not been lacking. Then, some day, she'd meet some decent young fellow, and——

A man holding a rifle stood in the roadway.

Lane yanked the jerk line. His eyes focused on the intruder. He began to recognize the cowhide boots, dirty gray clothes, tattered hat and scrawny face covered by bluish stubble. It was Joe Rambo, the crime-wave, the man he had rescued when half-frozen on the big grade.

Rambo strolled up alongside the wagon. He looked at the cargo and then grinned at Lane.

"Howdy!" he greeted.

"Howdy."

"Goin' to Leavenworth?"

"Where?"

"Leavenworth. It's a fine jail."

Lane eased himself in the wagon-seat and laid his booted foot on the brake.

"Just what are you getting at?"

Rambo jerked his finger toward the wagon's cargo.

"Take a drink of that moonshine. But mebbe you'd better not. You wouldn't give a damn then whether you went to Leavenworth or not."

IX

WHEN any living thing finds its feet in a trap and the jaws sprung, it is likely to experience a flashing instant of stark unbelief, a sort of quivering incredulity that such things could be possible. The sensation comes before terror means acceptance of facts. The facts take a moment to sink in.

For an instant Lane was benumbed. He couldn't believe it; not that he was frightened by moonshine, but because of the ugly trickiness which it suggested. He swung his legs around the back of the seat and stared at his orderly array of huge barrels, all standing amid sawdust which was held in by stacks of clean boards. He counted the barrel-tops peeping out of the yellow heaps. Twelve.

"Moonshine!" he repeated stupidly.

"Yep. You've got enough to paralyze a whole town."

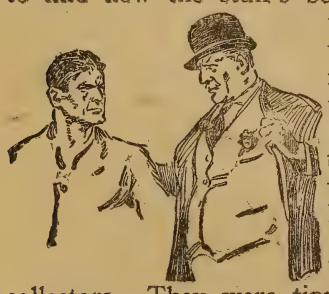
Lane slowly slid off the seat. He yanked a hatchet out of a tool box, knocked the top off the nearest barrel, and scooped out a cloud of sawdust. Gradually the top of a big sheet-iron cylinder came into view. With trembling fingers he searched near its top till a wooden plug appeared. He knocked it in with his hatchet. A whitish-brown fluid seeped out and stained the sawdust. Its smell was ferociously pungent.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Lane.

"Yep; you'll be worse'n that. There's a whole passel of Federal agents waitin' at the railroad station for you."

"What?" Lane regarded his informant. "How did all this happen?" he inquired slowly.

"They've been up and down the railroad line for weeks. They've been tryin' to find how the stuff's been gettin' into the city. Now they've traced it to this station."



"And I thought they were bill-collectors."

"'Huh! They're man collectors. They were tipped off yesterday."

"Who tipped them off?"

"Well; there was a flivver right close to 'em. It came from your country."

"Treachery, eh?" Lane's face reddened as he began to understand the plot. "That's gratitude. I brought him victory; now I'm in his way. So that's it." He clenched his powerful fists; and as suddenly relaxed them. "But I'm only the driver, the innocent employee. His scheme's impossible."

Rambo snorted. "Well, mister, folks are sayin' that you're the boss of this here country. They say you've got a mortgage on the whole outfit. Seems like the other feller could say he didn't know nothin' about it."

Lane saw it. "You're right. Dead right. The trap was set. I walked into it. Damn them, let me get back to them! Here, go down to the depot. Tell the officers I'll be waiting at the settlement. I'll have the evidence, never fear. I'll have their man; bound and gagged. Take off that lead horse. Ride!"

Rambo grinned. "Do you expect me to lead revenuers into the mountains? Hell, I make moonshine myself!"

"Why did you warn me, then?"

"Two reasons: first, you done me a favor; second, I don't want no revenue agents to find out nothin' no how, no way, no time."

Lane was forced to smile.

"Besides which," continued the ragged drunkard, "I may need a job. The pickin's doggoned slim around here."

"I'll give you a job, any time you want to straighten up. Look out—I'm going to turn the wagon. See me later. Gangway!"

Lane tautened the jerk-line, and slapped the brake loose with his foot. He drove ahead to a little clear space and swung a great circle which left tracks on clumps of sage and chemise and small grasses until the vehicle was again on the main trail, pointed for home.

"So that's the plot!" he exploded.

He speeded his horses. They climbed till they reached the stark Judas-tree on the crest above the settlement. He refused to put on the brake, and the heavy wagon shoved the animals downhill. It gained momentum. It stormed down the road, rumbling like thunder, bouncing off rocks and ruts, kicking up prodigious mud, making the poor bewildered horses race as fast as their legs could work, until Lane at last applied his rasping brakes and the outfit drew up in front of McCracken's barn. Sweat covered the bodies of the panting victims.

McCracken emerged from the big doorway. At sight of the wagon his jaw dropped. He started to say something, stopped, said it.

"My God, you got back quick!"

Lane didn't seem to notice. Deliberately he tied the jerk-line to the foot-brake, wound up his long whip, arose from his seat, took off his coat, folded it, laid it on the seat, and stepped off the wagon. He walked straight to McCracken.

"Yes; I came back quickly. You cheap sneak, you treacherous rogue——"

His fist leaped at McCracken. Lane regretted it, instantly, but above regret was astonishment at his own strength. He knocked the young fellow through the open doorway and into a pile of straw. Unbelievable! Lane stared at his clenched knuckles turning white where the impact had come. And then, still marveling, he looked at the victim in blue overalls and high-laced boots, still stunned, trying to sit up.

A third figure came rushing around a line of dark stalls. It was Carlsen.

"Hey, let that kid alone!" he yelled. "What are you doin'?"

"I'm going to run him out of the country. Do I have to fight you, too?"

"What for?"

"He sent me down to the railroad with a cargo of moonshine whisky! He warned the Federal officers."

"No!" yelped Carlsen, incredulous.

"You lie," bawled McCracken.

Lane's fists clenched again, but his mind worked faster. He strained the truth, knowing that he could make good.

"Perhaps the Federal agents will prove it as soon as they get here."

"Federal agents up here?" screeched Carlsen, turning white. His mouth was open. He was pop-eyed, breathing hard. The man was frightened almost out of his wits.

"So you're in it, too," accused Lane. "Fine gratitude, fine loyalty, fine ethics, fine people! Ye gods, why didn't I fight for Brod?"

Carlsen licked his lips. He laid a trembling hand on Lane's shoulder, while McCracken climbed to his feet.

"Wait a minute," appealed Carlsen, somewhat piteously. "We're gittin' excited here. You mean to say you took that there moonshine wagon to the railroad?" Carlsen turned to McCracken. "And you let Lane drive that wagon?"

McCracken's gaze shifted and he tried to slip past the doorway. Carlsen grabbed his arm as it came into the line of sunlight.

"Whoa! Wait a minute, sonny. Hold on. Yep, it's the moonshine wagon, all right; sawdust, barrels and all. So that's it. So you let Lane take it."

McCracken faced him suddenly. "Yes, I did. Sure I sent him. I wanted to get rid of him. I wanted to build up my own business. I wanted his hands off. He's working for the Brods. He's trying to get 'em in with us. He——"

Carlsen interrupted with a choking voice, half explosive, half whimpering. "You lunatic—and you risked *my* moonshine—*my* whisky—my work for weeks—so's to satisfy your own personal grudge. You tried to hand my white mule to the Federal agents—bring 'em swarming up here—just because you wanted to get rid of Lane."

"A pretty business," commented Lane savagely.

Carlsen turned on him. "Keep out of this. I've had to make a living somehow. You stand aside. I've got an account to settle."

McCracken pointed at Lane accusingly. "He took my girl away. She's never been the same since he came. Sure I'd send him to Federal prison."

Lane stared, horrified. "Why, I've never taken anybody's girl away from anyone."

"You lie! You lie!"

Lane managed to control himself. He spoke coldly. "So far as I can see, you never had a girl."

"Lemme at him! Lemme at him!" Carlsen grabbed the raging McCracken by the throat, shoving him back.

"Don't you try to fight him," yelped Carlsen. "I know what's the matter around here—and it ain't Lane!"

"He's got my girl——"

"Oh, shut up," snarled Carlsen. He turned to Lane. His eyes were moist with honest grief. "Think of it! *My* whisky! Mine. A whole wagon-load of it. Just to satisfy his grudge. What shall we do with him? What *can* we do with him?"

"I don't know," admitted Lane, turning away wearily, "I think it's hopeless!"

He had a sudden thought. He halted, speaking directly to Carlsen, "You can tell him this: tell him that the freighting in this country will be handled by the firm of Lane, Carlsen and Brod. Lane's going to supervise the finances. Carlsen is going to be manager, if he can leave moonshine alone. The Brods are going to share in the profits. This fellow's interests will be handled by the company."

"What?" yelled McCracken. "I won't stand for it. I'll take my wagons. I'll fight you——"

"You can't. I have a mortgage on 'em."

"Yah! Just because you've got money——"

"Shut up," bellowed Carlsen. "I notice you didn't mind his money when it

was helping you. Come on, I'll tend to you!"

Lane moved away, letting them argue it out. He strode moodily into the road and swung toward the store. To his surprise, he saw Marian walking ahead of him, with books under arms, just where the highway ran between the elders. She had just passed the barn! She had heard that awful talk! He groaned. What a cheap scene, with Marian mentioned in a voice that yelled to high heaven. He didn't want to meet her just then. He slowed down, but she seemed to hear him coming. She turned and saw him, and she halted. Crestfallen, he approached her. He didn't know just what to say.

"I'm sorry you heard it," he apologized.

She nodded. It was the quick, sober little nod that he had come to know so well.

"I couldn't help but hear."

"He was unfair," he explained, striving to say just the right thing. "I don't like to be put in that sort of position." He found his hands clenching again. Suddenly he blurted out, "If I were only thirty!"

She seemed incredulous, and then she laughed, throwing back her head. He was perplexed by it, so that he wanted more intensely to set himself right.

"It was wrong," he stormed, "unfair, unjust. I don't want that sort of thing. I don't want to alter our friendship. It isn't right. I'm forty, approaching middle age, too old."

She nodded soberly again, though her lips still twitched. "How old is your soul?" she inquired.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

She seemed to reply toward a carpet of long grass alongside a cold little brook.

"Well, could you imagine a stodgy middle-aged man leaving all his affairs and plunging into the mountains in midwinter?"

"But——"

"Could you imagine a dull-minded old fogy raging because he couldn't jump a hedge? Could you imagine a stupid comfort-loving elderly person storming because of his lack of adventure?"

"Marian! What are you saying?"

She faced him squarely. "Nothing but the truth. Haven't I seen you driving, riding, racing, hurdling fences, managing people, laying down the law, brawling, arguing, fighting, like the worst ten-year-old in my school? Didn't I just see you run a ten-horse wagon downhill, with every wheel in the air, till I was sure the whole thing would turn over?"

"Marian! Marian! And you're taking *my* part?"

"About your age; yes."

"Oh. My age!"

He looked into her eyes. His pulses quickened.

"My age," he remarked, in a curiously flat voice, "is all that matters just now. You are almost persuading me. Do you believe what you have said?"

"Why not?" she answered frankly.

"Then I'll claim my privilege."

He stepped forward. He caught her in powerful, crushing arms.

"Marian! Oh, I should have known. Like to like—youth to youth—and years mean nothing! I was afraid, Marian—afraid of myself—afraid of you—but I'm willing to be persuaded, mighty willing!"

She drew a short breath that was a sigh, a laugh, a cough. He eased his terrific grip. She looked up and smiled, though her eyes were glistening.

"And—and you believed this all the time?" he asked, somewhat dazedly.

She nodded. He looked past her fair hair, topped by its saucy little tam-o'-shanter.

"My heavens! Look at the time I've wasted!'

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT SWIM

By W. TOWNEND

Author of "The Death of a Snake," "The Biggest Thing," etc.

DOWN INTO THE BLACK WATER OF THE DOCK THE THIRD ENGINEER OF THE "SEDGEMOOR" SAW FRED KEYMING GO TO HIS DEATH THAT WINTER NIGHT. AND, "QUEER HOW SO MANY SEAFARING MEN CAN'T SWIM," SAID THE CORONER. BUT MAC ARCHRAN KNEW OF SOMETHING QUEERER

MR. MEDGE, the third engineer of the tramp steamer *Sedgemoor,* leaned against the side of his bunk, with his arms folded across his chest and his head bowed, and talked in a low voice, bitterly and fiercely, and with such vehemence that the three men who heard him were awed and startled.

His thin, peaked face was very pale in the light of the electric lamp; his dark, close set eyes were the eyes of a martyr who endures torments, through no fault of his own, and wonders at his sufferings; his thick, black hair was damp on his forehead; his whole appearance and demeanor gave an impression of restrained emotion, held in check only by the exertion of a supreme will power.

Never at the best of times a very approachable man or a man who made friends or inspired confidence in others, his sudden lack of reserve, his appeal for the sympathy of his shipmates was, as a consequence, all the more strange and mysterious; yet, taking into consideration the circumstances, it was understandable.

"To say things like that to me!" he said in a flat cockney accent. "Wasn't I poor old Fred's friend? I'd have done anything in the world for 'im! Anything! I've been through 'ell the past three days, I 'ave! Yes, I've been through 'ell! 'Arf driven out o' my mind, I've been! Crazy! And' then to 'ave the coroner goin' on at me like he didn't believe a thing I said! As if he thought me a kind of criminal! An' me, 'arf out o' my mind wi' what I been through."

Mr. Lydcott, the second mate, nodded his head. He was an earnest, round faced young man who had acquired a reputation on board for knowing everything a little better than anyone else. He was always willing to give advice to those in need. But he never spoke without duly meditating on the effect his words might have As now.

"It's a shame!" he said, sucking at his pipe. "A damnable shame! I know how you feel, Mr. Medge, I can assure you."

Mr. Frane, the fourth engineer, a lean and wiry youngster of twenty-one, perched on the flat top of the bureau, was touched by the third engineer's distress.

"But, Mr. Medge," he said, "the coroner took it all back when he knew the truth, didn't he?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Medge. "Ah! But did he? Did he? He said it! He made me feel like I'd committed a crime, he did, in front of everyone!" Mr. Medge raised his arms in a gesture, as it were, of despair and then took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his face. "God! it's 'ot tonight, ain't it! You could 'ave done with less steam, Mr. Frane, easy."

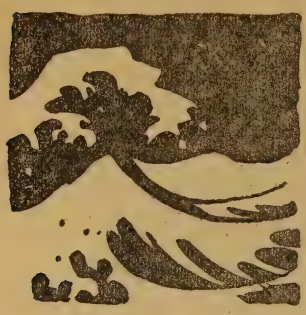
The fourth engineer said nothing. Though the radiator was hot to the hand, the room was cold. But that, he reflected, was only another proof of what poor Medge was feeling.

"It's snowing again," said Mr. Lydcott. "We got to expect it this time o' year, o' course! It's better than rain or fog, all the same."

The third mate, Mr. Keock, who sat by Mr. Lydcott's side on the settee, said, "What was it the old bird said: 'Queer how so many seafaring men can't swim!' Eh? Was that it?"

"Queer is it?" said Mr. Medge. "What's he know! 'Ow'd he like to be aboard a packet like this, sinkin' in a Western Ocean gale, say, an' knowin' there wasn't one chance in a 'undred million o' bein' saved! I tell you, I've thought it all out time an' again! I'd rather drown quick than have to fight an' struggle an hour or more against them dam' big seas! I would!

An' die at the end! Go quick, that's my motto! Quick an' easy! No fightin' against what's bound to smash you! That's what I say, anyway."



"There's heaps of others just the same," said the fourth engineer thoughtfully. "I've known sailors back home, old windjammer sailors, that 'uv been going to sea all their lives an' never took the trouble to learn to swim for just that reason."

"Think I wouldn't 'ave gone in an' dragged him out, poor old Fred, if I'd been able," said Mr. Medge, once more folding his arms across his chest. "Of course I would! But I couldn't. What was the use o' me throwin' away my life for nothin'? That's what it would 'ave been, wouldn't it? I wanted to 'elp. But I could 'elp more by stayin' alive than by gettin' myself drowned, couldn't I? Poor ol' Fred!" Mr. Medge shuddered and the others knew that he saw in his mind his friend drowning and himself unable to help. "Oh, yes!" he said. "I went through 'ell! I'm goin' through 'ell now! An' the coroner said I ought to 'ave gone in an' saved him, an' wasn't I ashamed of myself! God!"

And again the fourth engineer who wanted to be fair, even to the coroner, interrupted him mildly. "Ah! but that was before he knew! He took it all back afterward, didn't he?"

"That's right, Billy," said Mr. Keock. "He took it back sure enough."

"I warned him," said Mr. Medge, almost as one who recites to himself the facts of the case. "I warned him! He wouldn't listen to no advice, Fred wouldn't! You know what he was like when he'd taken a drink or two, don't you! Yes, he was 'arf drunk, o' course! But I couldn't say that at the inquest, could I?"

"You ought to have done," said Mr. Lydcott. "By right! Laws of evidence, like! You ought to have told, mister."

"Not with his mother there," said Mr. Medge, shaking his head solemnly.

"You couldn't have done nothing with ol' Fred Keyming, not if he was *really* drunk," said Mr. Keock. "Do you remember that night at N'Orleans? Gosh! Him fighting."

"He had his own way," Mr. Medge continued in his low, toneless voice. "I told 'im not to go playin' the fool, that time o' night, cold an' snowin' 'ard, an' near midnight, but 'e wouldn't listen! No, he wouldn't, not to me, even, though I was 'is friend! An' then he slipped on some ice, it must have been ice, or else he tripped over a bar of iron or some wire rope, I dunno what quite, but he fell! Yes, poor ol' Fred fell, an' before I could stop 'im, he was over the side! I tell you, Mr. Lydcott, an' you, Mr. Keock, as I'm a livin' God fearin' Christian, I pretty nigh went out of my mind! I saw 'im go! I tried to save 'im! I couldn't! I couldn't! An' there I was, no one near, no ship in that part of the dock, no policeman aroun', me, on my 'ands an' knees on the edge of the dock, lookin' down into the black water through the snow an' seein' nothin'! God, it was dark! What could I do? Nothin'! Me, on my 'ands an' knees, leanin' over an' lookin' into the dark an' seein' nothin' an' hearin' nothin,' nothin' at all, except mebbe —dunno!—poor Fred drownin'! It was 'orrible! An' ses that coroner, 'Why didn't you go in an' save him?' "

Billy Frane who was perhaps more sorry for the third engineer than either of the other two, knowing as he did what he had suffered at the time of the drowning, tried to comfort him.

"I shouldn't worry about that, mister! We all know, all of us, from the old man and the chief down, that you'd have risked your life ten times over to save him, if you'd had a chance! You would! Anyone would!"

Mr. Medge's answer was so quick and sharp that it was almost as though he had snarled at him.

"All very well for you to talk, mister! You went in after 'im! You were able to! I wasn't! The coroner didn't say nothing to you, except you done well! Oh, you did, too! I'm not denyin' it. You done well. But then you're different from me. When I saw you comin' along the side of the dock in the snow, when I knew who it was, I felt sure there was 'ope! I knew if anyone could bring him out, it was you. I made sure you'd save 'im."

"Well," said Mr. Keock, "an' didn't he have a dam' good shot at it, eh? He did! Lucky for you, Billy, you didn't go west the same time as poor ol' Fred. Swimming around that blasted dock that time o' night an' diving after him. It gives me the creeps just to think of it."

"I dunno when I ever heard of anything

finer than that," said Mr. Lydcott slowly. "I dunno when I ever did, in all my experience. I'd call it, if I was asked, dam' fine!"

The fourth engineer was beginning to feel embarrassed. He wished that they'd talk about something else.

"It was cold," he said gently, staring at his red, chapped hands. "Yes it was cold all right. I won't deny it."

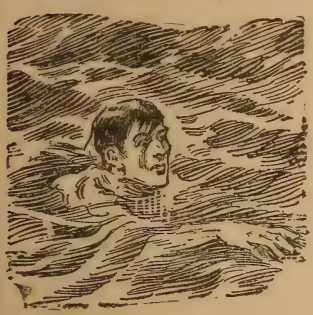
"How many times was it you dived?" said Mr. Keock. "Five, or six, was it?"

"Oh, drop it, mister, for Heaven's sake!" said Billy Frane.

"And poor old Fred dead when we got the pair of you up the ladder," said Mr. Lydcott. "And you half dead! He'd been drinking, eh?"

"Yes," said Mr. Medge. "Drinkin'. D'jer know what was the last thing he said, almost, as we were goin' along the side of the dock? He said, 'Syd, I'll be glad when I'm safe an' sound in my bunk! I'm tired,' ses he, 'an' I'm sleepy.' He was in his bunk, he was, sooner'n he expected, poor ol' Fred, an' he never woke up from 'is sleep, neither! The best friend a man ever had!"

And all at once Billy Frane shivered.



How near he had been to sharing the second engineer's fate only he himself realized. It swept over him even now, like a wave of the ice cold water of the dock, that but for some miracle he, too, would have been waiting his funeral on the morrow.

He understood what agonies of mind Mr. Medge was feeling. He knew that they were doing him a kindness by not leaving him alone with his regrets. He wanted to help him and cheer him up.

"It'll be in the newspapers," said Mr. Lydcott presently. "Inquests always are. Inquests of drowned sailormen, anyway." He broke off and stared at the third engineer. "Mr. Medge, you're looking dam' queer! What you want is a good, stiff glass o' rum! Rum or brandy. Something to steady you! That's my advice, take it for what it's worth."

Mr. Medge shook his head.

"No, mister, I don't drink."

"It's not a drink, it's a medicine in your case. A what you might call it—a sedative."

"I seen too much o' that kind o' medicine," said Mr. Medge. Again he shuddered. "I can't forget what that ol' swine of a coroner said to me. I ought to 'ave gone in an' saved Fred. Whether I knew 'ow to swim or not, he was 'intin' I ought to have got myself drownded, too."

"But that's stupid," said Mr. Lydcott. "Your own logic an' commonsense 'ud tell you he didn't mean that! He couldn't."

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. Keock. "Like a dam' blizzard! Remember catchin' it off Halifax Harbor, that time. Like to tear the inside out o' you!"

There was a short silence.

"His mother's the one I'm sorry for most," said Mr. Lydcott presently.

The fourth engineer remembered how she had cried as she thanked him, and he, too, felt sorry, terribly sorry.

"It's tough on her," he said. "I don't believe she'll get over it, ever." He was not clever, he knew; he was afraid to rely on his own judgments; as a rule his views and opinions were the views and opinions of other and older men; but now there came into his mind a thought that seemed entirely his own, quite new and rather wonderful: "Life's more hard on the women than it is on the men, isn't it?" he said.

Mr. Medge uttered a short, harsh laugh.

"Don't believe his mother even took it harder'n I did," he said in a flat voice. "She lost 'im, yes—'er son. But did she have to stand by an' see 'im drown an' not able to 'elp, like I did? Did she, eh? She didn't." Mr. Medge looked dully around the little room, with haggard face and a challenge, it seemed, in his dark eyes. "I can't get it out o' my 'ead," he said, "she was blamin' me for not 'elpin' 'im!"

"She didn't say so, did she?" said Billy Frane. "She didn't, I know."

"It wasn't so much what she said," said Mr. Medge. "It was 'ow she looked. It kind of made me go queer all over. I done my best. I did! It's awful, feelin' people suspect you! Awful! 'Ow did I know my not bein' able to swim was going to lead to this, though?"

"I shouldn't take it so hard, if I were you, mister," said Mr. Lydcott. "What's the use of it?"

"Besides, even if you had been able to swim, ol' Fred would have drowned, anyway, wouldn't he?" said Mr. Keock. "You weren't to blame, no more than we were."

Mr. Medge, however, refused to be com-

forted. No one, he said, could understand what he'd been through.

After a time Mr. Lydcott said, knocking the dottle out of his pipe against his heel, "There was a girl, wasn't there? Has anyone heard from her?"

"I wrote to 'er," said Mr. Medge. "But she ain't answered."

"Poor thing," said Billy Frane. "Him going like that, and his girl left. Without a message or nothing."

There came a sudden tapping at the door.

"Come in," said Mr. Medge quickly. "Who is it?"

A thick set man in a wet overcoat entered and stood for a moment, peering doubtfully, as it were, through the tobacco smoke at the occupants of the room.

He was a remarkable looking man. His clean shaven, tanned face was hard, as though carven from stone; his mouth was stern and grim, almost cruel; yet his keen eyes were filled with what seemed sorrow and despair and suffering. He stared closely at Mr. Medge. Then, without relaxing in the slightest degree the rigidity of his expression, he said in a deep voice, "It's lang syne we met, Syd!" and held out his hand.

Mr. Medge had uttered a curiously stifled, "God!" And he was gazing at the newcomer with a stricken look, as though his arrival had robbed him of the last remnant of his strength.

"Dinna say ye've furgot me, Syd!"

"How are you, Jock?" said Mr. Medge in his hoarse whisper. "I'm glad to see you! I am, indeed!" They shook hands. Mr. Medge turned. "This is Mr. MacArchran, an old shipmate of mine! Jock, this is Mr. Lydcott, the second mate; the third mate, Mr. Keock; and Mr. Frane, the fourth engineer." The big man shook hands with each.

"I'm vera glad to mak' yer acquentance," he said. He spoke to Mr. Medge. "We got in this forenoon an' the first thing I heard frae the super was that poor auld Fred was deid! I asked fur leave an' lef' by the next train. They tell me he's to be buried the morn's morn'."

Mr. Medge nodded but did not speak.

The big Scotsman, stooping a little, remained standing in the centre of the room, bare-headed, the melted snow dripping from his overcoat onto the faded strip of carpet, his eyes puckered, his lower lip thrust forward stubbornly, his hands behind his back.

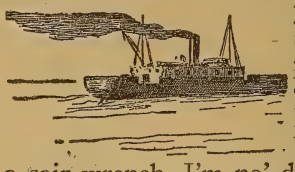
The two mates and the fourth engineer had risen to their feet.

"We'd better be going," said Billy Frane.

"No!" said Mr. Medge sharply. "I'd rather you stayed."

They waited, uncertain what was the right course. It almost seemed as though the big Scotsman's grief had rendered him incapable either of speech or movement. Mr. Lydcott asked him if he would like to sit down. He shook his head.

"No, no! I'm much obleeged to ye, but I wud prefair no'." His lips relaxed momentarily into what was almost a smile. And then he went on. "I'm the mate o' yin o' the ither ships o' the comp'ny, the *Cotswold!* An' Fred Keyming was ma best frien'! It was a sair wrench, I'm no' denyin', to hear he was gaun." He squared his shoulders. "Hoo did it happen, Syd?"



"He slipped, walking along the edge of the dock at night, an' fell into the water an' was drowned!" said Mr. Medge.

"Poor auld Fred!" said Mr. MacArchran. "An' wasna there anyyin wi' him wha cud gang into the dock an' haul him oot?"

His keen eyes glanced reprovingly, it seemed, around the room.

Mr. Lydcott nodded toward the fourth engineer.

"Mr. Frane here dived five times for him. He was dead when he got him to the ladder."

"Dived five times, eh!" said Mr. MacArchran. "Is that a fac'?"

"It was pitch dark," said Mr. Lydcott, "twelve o'clock almost and snowing hard! Mr. Frane was about finished when he reached the ship."

"Aye, I've nae doot!" said Mr. MacArchran. "An' poor auld Fred was deid! Weel, weel! An' what was it mad' him slip an' fa' into the watter?"

No one answered him. Mr. MacArchran looked at each of the four men in turn. His manner seemed vaguely hostile. It was as though he were suspicious of some evil. The silence grew unendurable.

"Canna ye answer a plain question, any o' ye?"

Mr. Lydcott asked himself suddenly what was the good of him standing there like a fool, saying nothing. Was he, a second mate, afraid of the mate of the *Cotswold* or what? He cleared his throat with a little cough and said, "They say he'd taken a drop too much."

Mr. MacArchran wrinkled his broad

forehead. "*They!*"... he said. "Huh!" And then he wheeled round and spoke to Billy Frane. "You!" he said sternly, "What fur couldna ye keep him awa frae the edge o' the dock? Didna ye unnerstaun' that a drunken man's no' able to presairve his balance the same as yersel'? What fur didna ye look after him?"

Billy Frane was angry. What the blazes was he talking like that for?

"*I* wasn't with him," he said gruffly. "I didn't reach the dock till he'd been in the water five minutes, at least."

The big Scotsman appeared bewildered.

"I ask yer pardon, Mr—Mr. Frane! I didna mean to affront ye. He was by himsel', then, poor fella."

"No!" said Mr. Medge. "No. You're wrong, Jock. He wasn't."

Mr. Medge's voice, hitherto so low that it was at times almost impossible to hear what he said, was now so loud, so harsh and strident that the two mates and the fourth engineer stared at him in amazement.

"What's that?" said Mr. MacArchran. "He wasna alone, eh! Wha was he wi'?"

"Me!" said Mr. Medge. "He was with me."

"Then why in God's name didna ye gang in an' fetch him oot? What stoppit ye, Syd? Whether or no poor Fred was drunk, *you* were sober! I ken fine ye were! Why didna ye save him?"

Mr. Medge had half closed his eyes. His face was now ghastly in its pallor. He looked old and shriveled. He looked as though some terror had numbed his faculties. He looked like a corpse.

Billy Frane did not particularly care for the third engineer; they had little in common. But now all his instincts bade him go to his defence and protect him from what seemed deliberate and uncalled for enmity. He did not like the way that the big Scotsman spoke to him. He did not like the way he glared at him. And so, as Mr. Medge did not answer his question, he answered for him.

"He'd have gone in an' brought him out, mister, if he'd been able! But what good would it have done throwing away his life by going in after a drowning man, when he couldn't swim?"

"Couldna swim!" said Mr. MacArchran blinking. "I dinna get ye! Who couldna swim?"

"Mr. Medge, of course! We all know he'd have got the second engineer out of the water if he'd been able, but he wasn't able! He can't swim! That's all there is to it."

Mr. MacArchran turned and gazed at Mr. Medge as though he were some stranger whom he saw for the first time.

"Oh!" he said softly. "An' so ye canna swim! You! Good God A'michty!"

"You *would* come 'ere, wouldn't ye?" said Mr. Medge. "I might 'ave known it! Interferin' again, o' course! Mixin' yerself up with what don't concern ye! Why can't ye leave me alone? What 'arm 'ave I done you?"

His voice rose louder and shriller. "What 'arm 'ave I done you, eh? Get back to yer own ship! Fred's dead, I tell ye! He was my friend as much as he was yours! I've been through 'ell. I can't stand no more of it."

"Why not let him alone?" said Billy Frane sullenly. "Can't you see that he's not himself?"

"Aye!" said Mr. MacArchran. "He's no' himself! An' he tellt ye he couldna swim! Weel, listen to me, an' I'll tell ye diff'rent! Yon man staunin' afore ye the noo is the finest swimmer I ever seen in ma life! I defy ye to produce a West Indian black, or a Hawaiian frae Honolulu, or a Krooboy oot on the West Coast, or one o' thae Malays, that was as muckle at hame in the watter as Mr. Medge here, or could ootstay him in p'int of endurance or dive wi' the same degree o' proficiency! An' yet he tellt ye he couldna swim! God! Would ye credit it?"

Mr. Medge's forehead was damp with sweat. His mouth was open. There was a dribble of saliva on his chin. His eyes were glazed and flecked with blood. "You, Medge, what did ye mean by sayin' ye couldna swim? Eh? You let Fred droon on purpose, you dam' murderer! What did ye do it fur?"

"It's not true," whimpered Mr. Medge. "It's not true! Keep him away from me, some of you! Mr. Lydcott! Tell him to leave me alone! Leave me alone, Jock! Damn you, leave me alone, you big devil!"

"What fur did ye let Fred Keyming droon?" said Mr. MacArchran. "Tell me!"

"I didn't! I didn't!"

Mr. MacArchran took him by the arm and shook him gently.

"What fur did ye let Fred Keyming droon?" he repeated. "Come, man, ye must answer, whether ye like it or no'!"

It seemed then that Mr. Medge's resolution was broken. He uttered a loud

wailing cry and covered his face with his hands.

"He stole my girl!" he sobbed. "He stole my girl!"

Mr. MacArchran released his arms.

"What girl?" he asked. "What girl did Fred Keyming steal frae the like o' you?"

"The girl who'd promised to marry me!

She did promise, an' if she ses that she didn't, she's lyin'! It was Fred's fault that she gave me up! After he come she wouldn't look at me! He stole 'er! I know he did, whatever ye say! He stole 'er! Why should I risk my life draggin' a thief out of the water, eh? Why should I save 'im for 'er? I got a weak heart; I let him drown! D'jer understand? I let 'im drown, an' I'm more glad o' that than of anything else that ever 'appened." He grinned at Mr. MacArchran with a kind of mad triumph in his eyes, as though he knew that no power on earch could rob him of his victory. "Why don't ye kill me?" he jeered. "Go on! Kill me! I ain't afraid! Kill me!"

Mr. MacArchran sighed and looked at him gravely before he spoke.

"It was you got Fred drunk, o' course! Ye could swear in a court o' law that ye didna tech him, I daursay: nane the less, his deith's on your soul! Ye're a murderer! By God, man, it mak's me seeck to luk at ye! Aye, it does! An' ye let poor Fred droon because he'd stolen yer lassie! What was her name?"

"Mary Carrow," said Mr. Medge.

"Mary Carrow!" said the big Scotsman in a strangled voice. "Mary Carrow goin' to mairry *you!* Why, you daft fool, didna ye ken I mairrit Mary Carrow three months syne? She's ma wife, not Fred's! It wasna him that she wantit, but me."

Mr. Medge put his hand to his heart and began to laugh. He was laughing when he dropped back on to the settee and laughing when he toppled over limply onto the floor. He was still laughing, so it seemed, a frozen, silent laugh, even after Billy Frane had picked him up and found he was dead.

THE HUMBOLDT

THE Humboldt, first known as Ogden's, and then as Mary's River, and for good reasons called Barren River by Walker, played an important part in the overland emigration to California. Rising along the western slopes of the Tucucsits Mountains in northwestern Nevada, it flows south and southwest, is joined by its North Fork, and wanders westerly across the northern end of the state before turning on its southwesterly course to become lost in its sink. On its way it was fed by numerous tributaries, one of them one hundred and twenty-five miles long, but their contributions amounted to nothing most of the year, and the Humboldt was very little larger near its sink than it was above its forks, nearly three hundred miles away. In the California Trail days it often was only a series of pools, edged by salt-encrusted mud. Its valley was a scene of desolation. Sand hillocks and alkali wastes ran across it from mountain range to mountain range, studded with sagebrush and greasewood, the only greenery being the willows, currant bushes and grass along its banks, and the small oases around the few moist creek beds and the water holes. Through the upper end of the valley the road was hard and smooth except where it crossed an occasional sand hillock to avoid rocks and canyons; but along the lower end it crossed sharp gravel, and a soft, ashy soil, the mules often sinking into the latter past their knees. There were a few hot springs in the valleys, with temperatures high enough to cook meat. Showers were not uncommon, but the spongy, thirsty soil, and the hot, dry air wiped out their little moisture in a few minutes. Cliffs of basalt cast their gloom over the valley and increased its air of desolation. Finally the river spread out and ended in a great marsh ten miles long by half as wide, an ill-smelling swamp of scum, reeds and coarse grass, its foul waters saturated with alkalies. This was the great Sink of the Humboldt, where it was questionable, because of its large area, if the sands absorbed as much of the river as the air sucked up. Such was the Humboldt, and, poor as it was, it proved to be of great value to the overland emigration, since it turned an otherwise impassable desert valley into a possible trail. Fremont changed its name from the Ogden to the Humboldt, with high-handed disregard for the honest warrant in its former christening. It is three hundred and fifty miles long, rises in Nevada and disappears there. Its sink and the salt marshes south of it were called Battle Lakes by Walker because of his slaughter of the Piute Indians near them.—C. E. M.

THREE BLACK CANDLES

By MORAN TUDURY

IT IS WRITTEN THAT ONE SHALL RESPECT THE GODS WHICH WERE OLD IN AFRICA BEFORE THE NEW WORLD WAS KNOWN TO MEN; THEIR POWER IS STILL GREAT

The Burning of White Candles is and ever shall be a true sign of Love and Happiness; but look Ye: Three Black Candles portend Ill Fortune and Death.
Voudou Rites; The Closed Book of Marie LeVeau.

THE coming of Bullock to Barataria Bay was an unfortunate thing. This fact was at once apparent to everyone—and to Kinton in particular.

"I'd write his firm in the North and tell 'em what a mess he's making," one city man said, "only he'd find out and fight me."

"I'd tell him personally," Kinton said, "if I hadn't already done so a dozen times."

In his capacity as agent for a great lumber syndicate Bullock should have been discreet—not to say conciliatory. Instead, he was officious. When a man is going about the business of taking other people's land away from them he should at least try to be diplomatic about it. But this was not Bullock's way.

"Listen"; he said when Kinton decently warned him that negroes' feelings were easily hurt, "I don't worry about anybody; niggers or white men. Up North we do things and get 'em over with. Down here you spend half your life tipping your hat."

Kinton's face crimsoned, but he held himself in check. "Possibly you're right, Bullock," he said quietly. "But you're in Barataria—not New York. And you're dealing with black children."

But Bullock was not to be warned. In the end Kinton saw it and ceased his efforts—except occasionally; he was too apprehensive about the man's safety for his own peace of mind. In a manner he was obligated to shoulder this responsibility. A cousin at Bullock's home office had written:

His name is Bullock, and he will be down there in a week or so. You won't like him; none of us do. But he's got pull here and anything you do to help him will help me——

So Kinton really had a moral responsibility.

The first week of his arrival finished Bullock forever so far as the negroes were concerned. They resented his drunken familiarity, the fact that he didn't try to understand them, and his plans; his loose mouthed boasting had soon made his mission public knowledge. He had a shack built—termed a shack loosely and because it was a single story structure. Otherwise it was a bridal cottage, a thing of luxurious furnishings and millionaire comforts. It was indicative of Bullock's egotism that while he brought along no clerk or assistant, he nevertheless hired three servants.

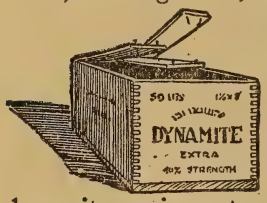
"I always work alone," he told Kinton five minutes after they met. "I'm the temperamental sort—advice bothers me. The

success of my idea has been proved many times by my record." He filled the glasses again. "I know lumber, I think, better than any man alive."

When Kinton had sufficiently recovered from this to look his host in the face again, Bullock was yawning.

"Of course, there'll be lots of work to do, but I enjoy work. I like being the trail maker, as they say. My fun is to go ahead, find the lumber, make the deals and so forth. Then I let the little fellows come on after me."

BULLOCK'S house was unique. It was almost Oriental in its lavishness. There were Chinese ash-trays and pillows, Persian carpets and stools, and many things seldom found in the mist of a Barataria Bay lumber thicket. The house had four rooms: a bedroom, a living-room, a kitchen and an extra room—a storeroom. In the latter Bullock kept his trunks, his surveying instruments, a couple of guns, and three cases of dynamite equipment.



"I may need the stuff," he told Kinton. "Tree stumps may hinder my surveying."

Kinton nodded, but bit his lip to repress a smile.

"What I intend to do is ride around on a horse, look the ground over and mark the sites I want. Then I'll see the niggers and pay 'em what I think they ought to get. After that I'll have the company take the thing over."

"And let them bear the brunt of the ill feeling you've aroused," Kinton thought, but he didn't say this. Instead he remarked, "I see. By the way, Bullock, you know this country pretty well? Got much dope on Barataria Bay, that is?"

Bullock did what he always did when somebody else was doing the talking—yawned; then he drawled, "Oh, so—so. I've talked a great deal with fellows who've been down here before."

"Did they tell you anything—in particular?" Kinton watched him keenly.

"For instance?"

"About the negro Voudouism." Kinton expected him to laugh; therefore, when Bullock did so, Kinton waited thoughtfully. Presently he spoke again—it may have been sadly. "If you've traveled abroad as you say you have, Bullock, you must have been struck with something. That, in any place you find yourself in—Togoland, East Africa, India, Siam—native religion is a pretty serious matter. Not something, for instance, to act like a school girl about."

Bullock flushed angrily. "Now what in hell d'ye mean by that?"

Kinton eyed him coldly. "Exactly what I say. Here, Voudouism is not laughed at. When we whites talk about it we do so alone and not before the negroes. We don't, as an example, kick a colored boy for talking to himself—as you did yesterday."

"That sort of thing annoys me. I won't have it!"

Kinton smiled, only a little, but Bullock observed it. "What are you grinning about?"

"It's a rather sorry grin, Bullock. Your saying you were annoyed by the boy who talked to himself. Did it occur to you that you might possibly be annoyed by other things?"

"No. I never let myself be annoyed for long. I——"

Kinton shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "Good God, man! What's the use?"

"If you mean the use in pressing your personal ideas on me," replied Bullock pompously, "there is no use at all."

"I meant——"

"What?"

"Nothing. I must be going." Kinton stood up, his finger tip idly denting his rather worn hat. Once he appeared about to say something, but again he stopped. Then in a more cheerful manner he remarked, "If you ever come out my way, look me up. I'm farther out in the woods than you, you know—over by the third bend of the bayou."

At the doorway he turned and looked back into the room. "You've a nice place here, Bullock. Nice place, yes." He prepared to go on, but hesitated and looked about again. "Very nice, indeed. You keep it well locked at night, eh? You would, of course." He nodded and walked on.

Bullock, standing in the doorway, watched him disappear, then he returned to the interior again. And once or twice he found his eyes wandering to the window-locks.

BARATARIA BAY, in its leisurely groping, takes in a country of paradoxes—this proved in many ways. For one thing there is a clash of architecture, the whites and the blacks taking to the land for shelter, and the "foreigners"

—the Filipinos, Cajans, and their like—to the water. The latter element lives in one-room shacks built on stilts over the water. The other matter, the one of nationality, is more obscure; it not being at all difficul to find in the veins of one man a blending of half a dozen races. Tempers, superstitions and prejudices, as a result, thrive sturdily.

All of this Kinton wanted to explain to Bullock. He wanted, for example, to explain the workings of Voudouism; to show him that, with only the difference of a slight veneer, he would find it as firmly established here as he had in the Congo. But Bullock wouldn't listen.

It would have made Kinton even more disinclined to advise if he could have been with Bullock this particular afternoon when he came out of his house and mounted his horse. Behind the first horse was another. Bullock beckoned to the boy holding his stirrup.

"Climb on top of that horse. You're coming with me."

Wondering, but without replying, the young negro obeyed. Then Bullock clucked to his horse and they trotted off.

For a short time, perhaps half an hour, they rode in silence, Bullock leading the way. They pressed through clinging, treacherous quicksands and under the trailing Spanish moss hanging from the water-oaks. They went through cypress thickets along the banks of the little chenieres and Bullock eyed the timber hungrily.

Finally he addressed the boy. "Now you lead the way."

The negro swung his horse forward obediently, but turned a puzzled countenance. "Where go to?"

Bullock exhaled a great cloud of tobacco smoke. "Anywhere," he said, "where the cypress is."

The boy took up the reins, then he looked hesitatingly at the white man again. "Where cypress?" he repeated.

"Yes. Anywhere!" Bullock snapped his fingers impatiently. "Go on!"

The servant did his best. He took Bullock through cypress swamps that made the others seem scrub patches, and Bullock noted all. When his glance rested on the little huts and their humble owners his mouth drew into a cruel grin. They would, of course, be kicked off. Presently he signaled to the boy.

"Aren't there any other cypress swamps around?"

The boy shook his head uncertainly. "No, sah. There ain't no more."

Something in his manner convinced Bullock that the other was lying. "I know better," he snapped. "Go on!"

And, trembling queerly, the boy pressed ahead.

If Kinton had been there, instead of fussing over his stuffed screech owls and mounted woodpeckers, he would have seen that there was something ugly in Bullock's eye, and further, something odd in the negro's manner.

Bullock, at any rate, was thinking of Kinton now—as he had been all morning. His present faring forth, as a matter of fact, had to do with Kinton. "Thought he'd frighten me with his silly yarns, did he?" Bullock muttered to himself. "Well, the man who tries that on me starts something." He was aroused from his reverie by the sudden halt of his guide. "What in hell's the matter with you?"

The boy was shaking violently, as if from cold. "Please, sah; don' go on!" There was more than a strong plea; there was fear. Bullock caught at the explanation and was furious.

"What's the matter with you, you monkey?" His temper was fast slipping from his hold.

"Ah sho' don' go this way, boss. Ah go back." The manner was still humble, respectful; but there was determination in the tone.

"Go back! You're crazy!" Bullock made a tremendous effort to restrain his anger. "What's the matter? Why won't you go on?"

The dark face turned toward him; white, staring eyes met his gaze. The boy pointed slowly ahead into the swamps and his voice was so low that Bullock could scarcely catch the hesitant words.

"In dar—Gran' Zombi! In dar—Papa Liba! In dar—" The slender body shuddered and, sitting there on his horse, the boy buried his face in his hands. The effect was not totally lost on Bullock; for a few minutes his eyes sought to penetrate the tall, wavy pampas grass, and the mournful moss. He listened intently; no

sound reached him but a steady, purring hum, a gentle, persistent *whirring*—the breath of the Gulf wind, the Gulf wind that was never stilled.

Abruptly he turned back to the boy. He shook his riding-crop suggestively. "You'll go ahead of me into that cypress," he said evenly, "or I'll break your neck."

The boy's eyes rose quickly to the white man's face. What he saw there convinced him Bullock was in earnest.

"And," Bullock continued casually, "if you spur that horse I'll plug you. Now get along."

Bullock had a gun, the boy saw that, and he decided not to tempt his master. He mumbled to his horse and they moved on. But his fear of the physical did not lessen his fear of the supernatural. His yellow teeth chattered like old dice.

There was little light, the moss and the palmettos took care of that, and the silence thickened noticeably. Now and then a pelican flapped hollowly through the foliage overhead, and a cold streak of light fell across the path. Occasionally the stillness was cleft by a reverberating splash in the swamp. Great blue herons, fluttering lazy wings, momentarily watched the intruders and then soared slowly, uttering crazy, lonely cries.

Bullock's appreciation of the cypress was somewhat vague; he was after something else now.

"Faster," he ordered. "We're going there, so you might as well get it over with." He received no answer; the boy was proceeding like some dream figure, motivated by power other than its own. But Bullock, taking a long swallow from his flask didn't observe this.

Presently they came to some sort of clearing, and the boy reined in his horse, descended in a flash, and prostrated himself. Bullock brushed past. "Hmn," he said staring at the scene before him. There could be no doubt but that it was a Voudou shrine.

It was a thing of odd stone figures—little snakes and curious animals; and a giant serpent, the Great Serpent with darting fangs, rising ominously from the center of all. Sleepy birds droned in little niches and protested the invasion. In the tall grass something wriggled away with a crackling noise.

It seemed to Bullock, walking coolly from one object to the other, that the stillness had grown more acute. As if, in some way, to counterbalance this he took another drink. The boy, he noted with a chuckle, would not desert now; his eyes followed Bullock apprehensively. When the white man walked up to the great stone figure and touched it inquisitively, he fell forward on his face, moaning. When he could he forced himself to observe Bullock again.

Bullock's attitude was one of increasing amusement. The whisky was warming him in a lively manner. He began to swagger in his walk about the clearing. He muttered things to himself and made nonsensical observations. The whole thing, the stone statues and the huge cauldron and the rest, was positively too funny. He took another drink and then he laughed.

There was that in his laugh that brought the boy to his feet instantly. It was a laugh that rolled and echoed through the swamp and brought indignant animal retorts. When Bullock had laughed his fullest he walked insolently up to the crude figure.

"Hello you!" he shouted, and then went into a prolonged fit of mirth.

Suddenly he braced his shoulder against the thing; it was heavy. Bullock, disregarding the fact that the boy had crept forward, surveyed the figure critically. Ten feet high, possibly, and three around—and stone. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and put his shoulder to it again.

Like an animal the boy sprang forward. "What yo' do?" he whispered hoarsely. His hands groped for the white man's shoulders. His eyes were unnaturally wide.

"Get away, you black fool!" Bullock snarled. He shoved the boy violently from him and dug his heels into the ooze again.

"Don't, massa! Don't!"

This time the boy screamed and desperately flung himself at his master. He grappled with Bullock, his grip slipped, he went down, hugging the man's knees. Bullock kicked blindly, he kicked again savagely. There was a moan, the hold about his legs weakened. He put all his weight against the stone figure—and pushed.

The thing swayed, toppled, and fell with a thick, flat *thud*. Bullock stepped back. It was then that he saw where the boy was.

He cursed in astonishment. Then he bent on one knee, peering at the body with the stone image lying across the upper half. He knelt there, staring for several minutes. He was not disturbed, only surprised and mystified. He was trying to figure how it had happened. Automatically, he felt the heart; funny, nothing moving there. It was all too funny! He sat down on the ground and took another drink.

It was perhaps half an hour later when he had succeeded in getting the body out from under the thing. Then, with his face slightly averted, he dragged it to where the horses were standing, shaking oddly. The boy's horse shied nervously, but Bullock caught the rein with one hand and held it, held it until he had tied the body across its back. Then he mounted his own horse. When this had been done, and he held the reins of the other horse in his left hand before going on, he paused. He reviewed the business, the story he would tell. It would be simple enough, he wasn't bothered about that. He yawned a trifle; it was getting dark. He slapped his horse.

Shortly after nightfall Bullock rode up to the sheriff's door and deposited the body. It had been a nasty business, he explained; the horse, the boy's horse, had thrown him. He had been viciously trampled upon—a nasty business, yes.

The sheriff nodded disinterestedly. He was rather resentful. What was one nigger more or less? It was his dinner-time; he was hungry. He thanked Mr. Bullock for having gone to so much trouble. Bullock waved his hand and drove off with the remark that he would come when the coroner's jury wanted him. The sheriff thanked him again. Afterward, he hoped he had thanked him sufficiently—hadn't been curt or anything like that. Mr. Bullock was a big man; perhaps Mr. Bullock could help him some time. At any rate he hoped he had appeared thankful.

He called up the undertaker.

THE thing to do when you're being bullyragged," said Bullock to Kinton, a few evenings later, "is to hit out quickly, wipe out your adversary immediately. Blood and sword are the quickest means to peace." He poured himself a generous drink.

Kinton, who had been unusually silent, even for him, the whole evening, eyed Bullock thoughtfully. "By which you mean —what?" He was turning a match over between his fingers.

"Just that. Victory is to him who strikes first, and hardest." Bullock smacked his lips over his drink and patted his thick stomach. "In Africa—I was in Africa you will recall—I had the reputation for being rather a bad hand. And rightly, I guess." He laughed humorlessly. "I dealt justice in the raw."

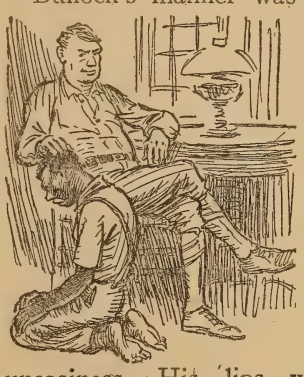
The naturalist watched the bloated face as it bent over the cigar; he observed the heavy jowls and the large, putty nose. An unpleasant countenance with a mouth that was worse than unpleasant—harsh was a gentle term. Bullock extinguished the match and clapped his hands for the boy.

"Got in the habit of clapping my hands for 'em in the Orient," he explained. Kinton nodded without replying. He looked up idly when the servant appeared.

Without giving a glance to the menial Bullock said to his guest: "I am going to give you an instance of what I mean. Observe me." He faced the negro now. "Come here, boy—nearer."

The servant came forward, puzzled. His eyes were fixed apprehensively on his employer.

"Get down on your knees—here." The command was not to be questioned; the boy knelt at Bullock's feet. There was suspicion and fear in the boy's eyes, but he did not quaver.



Bullock's manner was that of the lecturing surgeon. He put out one large, heavy hand and patronizingly rubbed the kinky head before him. He pinched the skin with little malicious playings, intensely amused at the kneeling boy's uneasiness. His lips which had been spread in an ugly grin now drew into a tight line.

"Now we will take up our lesson."

Kinton was filled with dread presentiment. He sensed that there was some evil thing in the other man's mind. But he said no word; he watched breathlessly.

"I will," Bullock said with the air of a showman, "begin with the fundamental situation." He glanced interrogatively at his servant. "Sam, I am a hard master—hey?"

The boy, lowering his eyes under the white man's heavy gaze, shook his head

eagerly. "No, sah. Mistuh Bullock good boss."

Bullock laughed loudly and turned to Kinton. "He doesn't really think that, of course." Without any other sign, Kinton's expression agreed with him.

"Sam, if I were to give you a dollar—one whole dollar—would you tell me I was a bad boss?"

The boy was undecided. He wished to be cautious, but then perhaps his boss was only playing a little game with him. He answered naïvely, "Boss, gimme dat dollah fust?"

For answer Bullock drew a bill from his pocket and put it in the negro's hand. "Now tell Mr. Kinton what kind of a boss I am, Sam."

The negro trembled nervously. "Mistuh Bullock a bad boss," he said parrot-fashion.

"How bad, Sam? Tell him how bad."

"He's awful bad boss." There was anxiousness in his tone, but also—and what was not lost to either of the two white men—a trace of conviction.

"There!" Bullock exclaimed triumphantly. "That's my first point! Sam doesn't like me because I beat him. He is sufficiently cunning, however, to keep his opinion to himself—unless he gets something out of it. For five dollars he would let a murderer into my house tonight."

"No, sah! Sam don' let nobody into de boss's house! No——"

"Shut up!" Bullock's voice was hard and even.

He took one of the black hands between the fingers of his right hand. He gave it a squeeze, and the boy's face was shot with pain. Kinton was holding himself back with an effort.

"And now, we come to our second, and last, point. This boy has proved himself dangerous, so, instead of giving his venom time to ripen, I nip it in the bud. In this manner I cause him to fear and respect me. Thus—" He suddenly grasped the black hand in his fist, his muscles tense.

Kinton sprang to his feet, eyes blazing, fists clenched.

But he was too late. A scream came from the lips of the boy struggling to release himself from Bullock's hold. But now Bullock released him of his own will. Kinton saw that two fingers on the black hand were oddly limp and twisted.

"My strength," Bullock remarked casually as he reached for his glass, "is really an astounding thing."

The thing was done; even were he to strike Bullock, the situation would not be saved. So Kinton stood, struggling with his indignation. As he became more calm he studied the man critically. Here was Evil personified—the breed that spawned Cain and Nero and Attila. He decided to say that which had been on his mind the whole evening. As the boy fled blubbering from the room, he seated himself again.

"Bullock," he inquired pointedly, "at the coroner's inquest night before last, were you questioned closely?" Kinton's eyes were piercing.

The color left Bullock's face; he was genuinely startled. He didn't see how Kinton could know. For a moment his nerve oozed from him. Then with a grimace he asked innocently. "What do you mean?"

Kinton was finished with him; he had known this for a quarter of an hour. The outrage he had just seen perpetrated had rid him of all feeling of compassion. Therefore, he no longer hesitated about speaking his own mind.

"I believed I was talking to a man, some sort of a man," he pronounced coldly. "But I see differently now—No, sit down," as Bullock started to rise angrily. "What I've got to say now will be the last thing, probably, that I shall ever say to you."

The man's tone, his terrible quietness and his impersonal gaze held Bullock more than anything else. Physically he could make two of Kinton. He sat there, staring.

"Only one thing I'll tell you. After that I'll get out."

Bullock waited.

"You are safe enough until one thing happens. When it comes to you, leave, get out—and *quickly.*"

The other man's eyes asked the question.

"Three black candles," Kinton said softly. "Three black candles, burning in a little row."

Then he was gone. Bullock, sitting there in the comfort and security of his living-room, pondered. Then he rose and went to the window. His anger was slightly stilled by his curiosity. Outside in the moonlight lay the clearing about his shack. The shack itself, built on an eleva-

tion, was in sight of the Gulf. Bullock's eyes rested on the stretch of water and he listened. Came the soft, drowsy, endless purring of the Gulf wind; not since his arrival had it been quiet. Then he saw the bushes swaying gently in the wind.

"Candles!" he snorted derisively. "A candle couldn't stay lighted two minutes in that damned wind!"

He turned back to the room and his drink, chuckling; chuckling because he had irritated Kinton. Inside of half an hour his mind had completely forgotten the nature of Kinton's warning.

BY THE end of three days Bullock was the center of a seething tempest. His behavior in business transactions, his utter lack of sympathy or consideration toward the landowners whose land he was taking, his sustained brutality toward the negroes; in all ways he drew criticism. From the whites came scornful censure, and from the negroes flaming hatred.

Stalking pompously through the woods and homesteads he amused himself by blasting inoffensive tree-stumps with the dynamite kept in his storeroom. Once, as a practical joke, he blew up a cow barn. When the negro homesteader complained to the local authorities Bullock condescended to point out that he had bought the land and had a right to do as he liked with it.

Whereupon the negro said, "Dar was a cow in dat barn."

"Very well," Bullock replied. "Here is five dollars for your cow." And he took the judge over to his shack for a drink.

Judge Le Blanc had a conscience, but he had also an eye for the future. When Bullock's company began to take over its newly acquired land Bullock would be in a position to hand out concessions. His family's welfare meant more to him than the grievances of a negro homesteader and a dead cow. So he said nothing.

When he left he did ask his host if he kept guns in the house.

"I do," said Bullock with a leer. "And I know how to use them."

"You may have to." But Judge Le Blanc only muttered this to himself as he left. He was thinking of something Bullock had told him; namely, that he, Bullock, had bought up that land which took in the area occupied as a Voudou shrine. There was one thing Bullock did not tell Judge Le Blanc. The Voudou shrine was no more. Three dynamite fuses backed by something more formidable than fuses had seen to that. Bullock had paid the cypress swamp another visit.

He laughed now, sitting before his long glass, a Corona smoking in his hand. Those poor misbegotten black fools! There would be no more worshipping of stone snakes, no more shouting and carrying on. He would have liked to tell Kinton about it, just for the amusement of beholding Kinton's face, but he was displeased with Kinton; Kinton had behaved like a faint-hearted woman.

On the next day he would have to hire more niggers. Two had, for unexplained reasons, quit. Well, he could get more—the blacks needed his money. Singularly enough he saw nothing peculiar in the fact that the only servant who had not deserted was Sam—Sam, with his curiously quiet manner and his bandaged hand.

That night, having absorbed as much liquor as he could carry pleasantly, he did an unusual thing—he carefully inspected all bolts on windows and doors. He also poked into his storeroom, peering into the dark corners. But all was well. Nothing there but his trunks and guns and dynamite equipment. Seeing the latter he was reminded again of the cow barn episode and he laughed aloud. Then, slowly and with much elaborateness, he donned his silk pajamas, took another drink, and got into bed. He was asleep instantly.

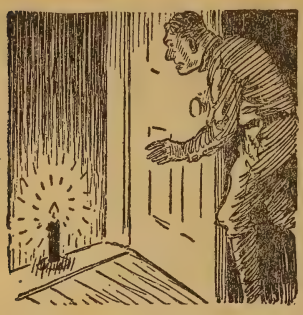
Somewhere around midnight Bullock awoke abruptly. He lay quite still, puzzling. He had awakened as suddenly and completely as if somebody had shaken him into wakefulness. So strongly imbued with the idea was he that, after a moment's reflection, he leaned over and switched on the lights. At least he pressed the button—there was no answering flood of light.

"Hell!" he muttered and started to turn over again.

And then, quite suddenly, he had—for some reason—a disquieting reaction. The stillness—why in the devil was it so acute! The explanation dawned on him; the Gulf wind, the soothing, whining Gulf wind had died, gone out. Unusual that. He slipped into his dressing-gown and stumbled out into the living-room; his throat was dry, parched. He'd get a drink.

He turned, without any conscious motive, toward the front door. Then he stood, wondering at what he saw through the glass pane. He walked forward, flung the door open—and recoiled as if his eyes had rested on a water-moccasin.

There, on the doorstep, as steady and straight as a pointing finger, burned a single black candle.



Bullock stood there for a moment, disturbed. Then by degrees his astonishment wearing off, he became himself. He peered outside; nothing but long shadows. He stooped, picked up the candle and surveyed it contemptuously. Then he burst into a laugh.

"Bunk!" And he laughed again. There was only one thing that stuck in his throat—this absence of the wind, the wind that hourly had purred like a giant cat at his door. "If that damned wind hadn't died down this thing couldn't have burned," he mused. Then he blew out the candle and threw it from him. He was still pondering when he got back into bed.

In the morning he gave Sam directions.

"Get a hammer and some nails," he ordered. "And some boards."

Outside, he set Sam to building what might roughly be termed an oblong box with one side open. Completed, it was fitted over the front door so that one leaving the house through the front door would step bang-up against a wooden enclosure. It was nailed securely to the house—sentry-box fashion.

Noting the look of wonderment on the negro's face he explained curtly. "A storm door in case of gales. No use getting the house wet."

He did not add that it would permit of no more black candles being burned on his doorstep. Not that Bullock was apprehensive; it was just that he still puzzled about the coincidence of the wind.

Today, however, he could have found no complaint regarding the presence of the wind. Since early morning the wind had been rising—it must have started up again after he went back to bed—and it looked as if a storm were coming up.

When the structure around the door was finished, Bullock mounted his horse and rode down into town to look for servants.

When he returned he came empty-handed—and furious. Not one servant had he secured. "Damned insolent niggers," he swore. "I'll starve 'em out when we get to work down here!"

After dinner he went out and watched the storm that was gathering. Far off he could hear the uneasy agitation of the water; in the tree tops the wind whistled eerily. There were no birds anywhere. On his way back he stopped to inspect the storm door. He chuckled at his cleverness. It wasn't so much he minded the candle business in itself, but he didn't like the insolence of the niggers in putting it there.

As on the previous night he drank heavily. He was, also, when he retired, in good humor. When he got into bed it was to sleep.

To sleep? For three hours, at any rate. He was awakened by the fury of the storm; rain, coming in the windows, crawled in little creeping lines across the floor. Somewhere outside he heard a big tree brought to earth with a booming sound. He yawned sleepily and decided to go back to bed. But all at once curiosity gripped him. He wanted, just for the satisfaction, to see that storm door again. As he made his way to the front of the house it occurred to him that he had had his effort for nothing. No candle could have burned in that storm.

At the door his expression lost its complacency. What was that—out there? Then, with his hand on the knob, he knew. Burning gently and peacefully in the shelter of the recently built vestibule, untouched by the onslaught of the storm outside, were two black candles. Bullock stared stupidly.

"Hell!" he exclaimed, and went back for a drink.

The two tiny flames, casting a soft, placating glow over the doorstep, burned on. The gathered stubs still were burning when Bullock came out early the next morning and put them out himself.

THE day had passed quickly, in a haze. There was, for one thing, a plausible explanation; Bullock had been drinking at intervals throughout the whole day. Another man, even a good drinker, would have been paralyzed hours

before. But then, as Bullock himself frequently pointed out, he could "carry his weight in whisky."

He hadn't been out of the house during the day at all. He had restrained all effort, except that little required to pour a drink or bully Sam. These were no effort, but pleasure.

Sam, his thick lips pressed together, took Bullock's brutal treatment without a murmur. Twice when the white man struck him his face was contorted with passion, but he made no outcry. When Bullock cunningly seized his injured hand and with a malicious chortle crushed it in his powerful grip, he swayed weakly but that was all. At length, weary of eliciting no verbal acknowledgment of his punishment, Bullock began to amuse himself with his pistols, firing at the ceiling, at the walls, through the window panes. By ten o'clock that night the place was a wreck, with its owner cavorting like a fiend in the center of all.

The hours slipped by unnoticed.

By midnight Bullock was roaring and laughing like a beast. His egotism had filled him so that he could scarcely contain himself. He wanted to beat, to maim, to crush everything—to crash like a juggernaut through everything that stood in his path. He caught the negro sneaking out of the house, pummeled him with his fists, and reached for a pistol.

"Goin' t' kill you, Sam," he hiccoughed. "Goin' t' shoot you full li'l holes. Go-in'——"

But the boy had slipped from his grasp and fled to the kitchen door.

Bullock, firing wildly, stumbled after him, but the boy had made his escape. At the door Bullock halted. Then, grinning convulsively he locked the door—bolted it. He turned and went over the whole house again. An idea seizing him, he began to drive nails into the windows, into the doors. When his work was completed he flung himself in the middle of the room with two pistols in his hand.

"Safe now, by God!" he screamed, slobbering. "Nobody goin' t' get me, nobody ——" He laughed and sent a bullet crashing through the table lamp. The room was plunged in darkness.

He was startled; then amused. He crowed triumphantly, as if he had done some remarkable thing. He began to lumber around the room. At the door he halted, expectantly, grinning although his piggy eyes held searching, not mirth. He was not disappointed.

Three black candles raised slender wisps of flame.

"Three of 'em," he yelled. "Three of 'em!" He laughed now as if he would split himself in the act.

With ludicrous solemnity he moved them inside the room, on the threshold of the door. He eyed them quizzically. Then he raised his hoarse voice in a shout.

"Kint'n! Kint'n! Three li'l candles—an' nothin' else, by God! Sam, you black f-fool. Hey Sam, lookit the three of 'em . . ."

Nothing, he saw, happened.

Nothing would happen, either, what was more. He kicked at the candles angrily and stumbled about in the dark until he found his bottle. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that while two of the candles had gone out, one had caught in the thick rug and was burning in a little flaming line. He watched it derisively, he cursed it, he defied it to hurt him. And the little red line crept on.

When he had taken another drink he turned his eyes to the floor again. The dwarf flame had crept through the doorway of the next room, the storeroom. Bullock watched it, grimacing. Suddenly to his ears came a curious sound. His expression was one of bewilderment. Then, as the sound resolved into a queer rasping sizzle, he stared fascinated. But only for an instant; then he shrieked with terror and staggered blindly forward. He knew *now* what that noise was. As his foot touched the threshold the sizzle shot into an unmistakable *h-s-s-s-s-s.*

He was, as a matter of fact, just groping crazily for the glowing coal of the unattached fuse, when on the other side of the storeroom a red flame reached the dynamite.

THE following night, it was remarked by Kinton, that the noise and shouting of the calinda and bamboula were the most boisterous that had yet come from the Voudou shrine. Still later, he noted—upon the bandaged hand of a negro boy—peculiar dark spots surprisingly similar to black candle wax. But, being a firm believer in the inevitability of justice, he held his tongue.

THE COW JERRY

The Adventures of a Wandering Texan

By GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN

Author of "The Baron of Diamond Tail," "Men of the Mesquite," etc.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

MORE THAN MORAL SUPPORT

CONTRARY to Orrin Smith's fearful foreboding, Windy Moore did not make a report of the cow jerry's pleasant little diversion. If it had been left to Windy to give the incident publicity, nobody ever would have heard of it. But Windy's conductor was sitting with his head out of the caboose cupola to get the breeze when the local passed the overhauled jerries that evening. His appreciation of Windy's antics while fanning the bullets away from his ears with open hand was so keen that he could see no seriousness in the case at all. Within half an hour after the local's arrival, all the railroaders in McPacken had heard the story, and great was the roar of mirth at Windy Moore's expense.

For all that, Tom was fired. Smith was not running chances on getting called down by the roadmaster for having a gun-slinging wild fellow like that in his peaceful gang of terriers. Smith stopped at the hotel desk to write Tom's time check, his indignation and resentment, his severity and censure increasing as his rumbling mind turned the disturbing speculation of his own peril.

It was a terrifying thought to Smith that he might lose his fine job on account of a wild Texas boy who didn't know any better than to run the risk of damaging company property with his fool gun, even though he may not have tried to hit Windy Moore. Suppose he'd shot a hole in the side of that boxcar!

Tom's momentary exuberance, the thrill that had quickened him like old times, over seeing Windy Moore jump for the ladder, had died away to a cold and hopeless feeling when he corralled courage enough at last to go down to supper. He was depressed and ashamed; he could not have felt much worse if Windy Moore had pitched off into the ditch with a bullet through his neck.

To make the situation worse, several railroaders were at the long table. Somebody among them started clapping his hands when Tom appeared; the others took it up, as if the hero in the melodrama had arrived with the money to pay off the old farmer's mortgage.

Tom was as red as if fury had set its torch to his fur. He could not have suffered a more distressing pang if he had lost a leg. Shame hits some modest people that way, with a torture that is harder to bear than fire. But the railroaders were more than half in earnest, as Tom learned when several came to his table presently, clapped him on the back, shook hands with

him and had their roaring laugh at this Texas joke, the humor of which seemed to grow as they carried it around.

They knew that Smith had discharged Tom. He was no longer a jerry, there was no degradation in the touch of his calloused hand. He had been only a sort of experimental jerry, anyway. Ford Langley lingered a little after the others, and approached Tom's table.

"Hang around town till pay-day, kid," he advised, "and I'll see what I can do for you. Nearly always somebody drops out after pay-day."

Tom thanked him with so much gratitude and sincerity in his soft, slow-dragging voice that the roundhouse foreman went away swelled up with a feeling of magnanimity, just as if he had stooped and lifted some wreck of a jerry out of the ditch, and taken him into the saloon and given him a drink.

Tom thought it would be a big and sudden jump for him if he intended to follow railroading, for a job in the roundhouse led to fireman, and fireman to engineer. In those days of much road building and quick promotion, the road from wiper to engineer was not a long one. Engineer was the top of consequence in McPacken. It combined dignity, affluence, high honor. An engineer could take the pick of anything in that town. It was the same in every little railroad center throughout the West in those days.

Louise waited until the congratulatory press had moved on, then approached Tom for his supper order. When she came from the kitchen with his order she brought her own supper also, the custom of taking this meal with the cow jerry being so well established that both looked upon it as a fixed event.

Tom told Louise about losing his job, and the reason for it, which she knew already. He mentioned the prospect leading to the right side of a locomotive cab which opened before him in Langley's friendly offer. Louise was not impressed by the magnificent future of this prospect. She sniffed; she tossed her head with lofty disdain.

THE COW JERRY

By GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN

Something about the story and an account of the previous chapters

As the scene for this story of an adventuring cowman, George Washington Ogden has chosen the town of McPacken, and draws an amazingly interesting picture of a Kansas cowtown of a period easily recognized in the development of the West.

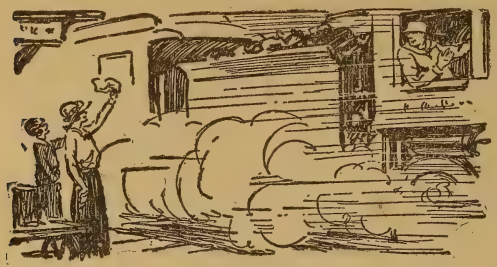
The story opens when Ma Cowgill, proprietress of a boarding house of McPacken, is warned that there are strings of cattle trains coming in from Texas, which will mean added custom for her boarding-house. These cattle are to be fattened on Kansas ranges and their arrival will bring back to McPacken some of the life which it enjoyed in the days when huge herds were on the ranges around the town itself. Mrs. Cowgill's interest is divided between the advent of the cattle trains and the arrival of Louise Gardner, a girl who is trying to sell books in the exceedingly unlikely market of the town of McPacken itself. Louise is just about down-and-out when Mrs. Cowgill takes her in as biscuit shooter in the boarding-house to assist her own daughter, Goosie.

Then the Texas cattle trains arrive, and bringing one herd, is Tom Laylander, whose father at one time was a big cattle owner in Texas, but whose family fortunes have faded away until all his hopes are concentrated on these cattle which he has brought with him, and which he hopes to fatten on the Kansas ranges. He finds, however, that the suggestion for bringing his cattle there was made deliberately by a certain Cal Withers, who now declares that he has a note for $10,000 owed to him by Tom's father and that he will attach the cattle to pay it. Tom is simply up against it, because he has very little money to go on with, and the matter will not be decided until the next court sits.

To tide over things in the meantime, Tom looks for a job, and since he cannot get one in his own line—his own cattle being under the custody of the sheriff—he takes a job as a section hand, or jerry, on the railroad. He doesn't realize that this means absolute loss of caste in a cowtown such as McPacken, but he soon discovers it. Mrs. Cowgill, however, stands up for him and he is still allowed to live at the boarding-house.

He causes much amusement by going out with the jerries clad in his cowpuncher outfit and carrying a gun. This gun finally is the cause of his undoing as a jerry on the railroad, because when one of the brakemen on a passing train indulges in the usual sport of baiting the jerries, Tom draws his gun and fires at him. He, of course, is a crack shot, and there was no danger of his hitting the man, but Tom loses his job, since the section foreman says he wants no gun toters among his section hands. So Tom is once more jobless, the fate of his cattle still undecided, but he himself isn't so wholly disconsolate since he has become interested in Louise Gardner, now waiting on table at Mrs. Cowgill's.

"I'd rather see you a section boss than an engineer," she declared. "A man gets to be a hoghead, and there he stops; his ambition is fulfilled when he gets a passen-



ger run, with all the silly girls along the line waving at him as he goes by."

"I suppose a man's got to stop somewhere, though," Tom ventured.

"But not hanging out of a cab window. There are not any traditions around here of engineers who rose to be presidents of railroads, or anything else. Once an engineer, always an engineer."

"Most men are satisfied when they hit a good thing, Louise. I think that accounts for engineers stayin' engineers, instead of any lack of ambition. They looked to me like a mighty fine class of men, seein' them ride past me while I was laborin' on the section. They never had a word of ridicule for us jerries."

"So much to their credit, anyway," she said. "Do you think you'll take the job if Ford Langley offers you one?"

"It'll be two weeks till pay-day; my case it'll come up in court and be settled before then. I can decide on the job after I know where I'm at. Court opens in five days from now. My lawyer says he'll bring my case to a hearin' not later than the second day."

"You can rest up till the trial, and not bother about a job. From what I hear these lily-handed aristocrats of railroad society say, section work must be a terrible strain on a man's physical and moral forces."

"It was hard at first, cruel hard," said Tom reflectively, "but I got toughened to it, so I didn't mind. If it wasn't for the remarks they pass on a man, jerryin' wouldn't be such a bad job at all."

"If you win your case, you'll sell your cattle in the fall and go back to Texas?"

"I've always been aimin' to, Louise, till around here lately. I've been considerin' and plannin' on stayin' up here in the north if I can get somethin' under my feet."

"It's bound to come right," she cheered him. "One way or another you'll come into your own again."

"I don't see how the judge can go against me when he learns the facts. There ain't one word in my father's records about a loan from Withers that stands unpaid, as far as mother has been able to find, and she's made a careful search. I believe that old rascal changed some paper bearin' my father's signature and made a note out of it."

"I think he might do even that, he's got a look about him of a crook. But if he wins in court, what then?"

"Time will have to answer that, Louise."

"It wouldn't do a bit of good to go and shoot him up, though," she said.

"We can think of enough disagreeable things every minute, Louise, without reachin' out ahead so far after them," he reminded her.

"Then I've got something to tell you that's not so disagreeable," she said, coming brightly out of the gloomy cloud that always obscured her when she talked of violence between him and Withers. "I'm going to quit my job tomorrow."

"You don't tell me?" There was consternation, rather than joy, in Tom's voice. He felt the blood creeping down, down, out of his face. "Are you goin' to leave McPacken, Miss Louise?"

"I've got Maud Kelly's place in the court house. Maud's been plugging for me strong, backed by Mrs. Cowgill, who despairs of ever seeing me catch an engineer in my present lowly situation."

"She's a calculatin' lady," said Tom. "What kind of a situation will you have in the court house, if I'll be allowed to inquire?"

"A sort of cashier, taking in money and giving out tax receipts, Maud says there is no great rush of business."

"There will be, I'll bet you. When you begin' takin' in money they'll come in from away out on the edges to pay their taxes. When do you aim to begin?"

"Day after tomorrow, just getting the run of the ropes while Maud's there, but my pay doesn't start for nearly three weeks. Maud's vacation begins Saturday, she's allowed two weeks off with pay, and she's already arranged for one of the other girls in the office to fill her job. It's the custom for one to relieve the other. So Maud and I are going to visit her brother's family, down on his ranch somewhere between here and the Nation. Maud's impatient to get down there and ride around. She's a regular cowgirl—she was brought up on a big ranch."

"She sure steps along like a fresh-air

lady. I always ad-mire that girl's gait."

"She's already spoken for, Tom; your case is hopeless."

"Ma'am?" Tom's blood was hot in his cheeks. He seemed to be mentally tiptoeing away from her, in his questioning, deferential, easily frustrated way.

"She's going to marry Mr. Cook, the baggage smasher."

"You don't tell me?" in expression of wonderment far greater than the subject, or Tom's own conscience, justified. "I've seen the gentleman," he continued, beginning to grow easy again, "enterin' a blue house down by the railroad yards."

"He lives there with his mother."

"He walks like a sheriff," said Tom, "with his chin held out from him so he can see his mustache."

"I never have made a study of the gait of sheriffs," Louise said, "but I fail to discover any of the fine points Maud sees in Mr. Cook, especially when he appears in the door of the baggage car as a background to a trunk."

"It's not a very exalted situation," Tom said thoughtfully, yet respectfully, remembering the humble job that was his own until that evening.

"Maybe he'll rise from baggage smasher with Maud to shove him."

"I bet he'll go clean through the top of the car," said Tom.

Louise looked at him, her lips trembling with a smile.

"Tom, you're the funniest kid!" she said.

"I wasn't aimin' to be," said he, feeling very boyish and immature.

"You never do, don't ever try to be. Just go on being natural and nice. You don't know how much I like you that way, so different from these fresh brakeys and firemen."

Tom was so confused, but in a delightful warm confusion that seemed the scented air of paradise, that he was not equal to any sort of immediate reply.

"I'd like to see Maud marry a better man," Louise returned to her subject abruptly. "She's a good girl. By all the ratings of McPacken society she ought to have a conductor, or a fireman, at the very lowest."

"There's Pap," Tom suggested, coming to his senses slowly again. "He seems to consider himself a high premium for any lady."

"I think Pap is training right now to rush the new deputy county treasurer. You can't imagine how my prospects have brightened in this town, Tom."

Their talk came back to the cattle after a while, as it nearly always did from whatever lighter matter that might lend them a recess of relief from the vexatious problem. Tom said he had to see the roadmaster the first thing in the morning, and get his time check signed. Then he intended to hire a horse and take a ride out in the country.

"Do you know where your cattle are?" Louise inquired.

"Down somewhere between here and the Nation—you know the line is only forty miles south of McPacken. The sheriff's grazin' them on the land I engaged from that bal' faced old liar to pasture 'em on this summer. I thought I'd take a look at them and see how they're fillin' out."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," she assented, but as if she had conditions in reserve. Then her hand reached out and fell on his where it lay beside his plate, in that swift, arresting way she had of doing this. "Tom you're not going to try to pull off anything tomorrow, are you?"

"No, Louise. I'll wait on the law like a gentleman. If it fails to give me my own, then I'll have to see what can be done."

"It will seem hopeless if the case goes against you, Tom. But I don't know; something may happen, it looks impossible that such a plain steal could be put through. When the time comes, I'm going to help you," she declared with sudden assurance, almost enthusiastic fervor. She looked up, her eyes bright. "It's too big a trick for one man."

"Why, Louise, you warm a person's heart when you talk that way!" said Tom, glowing with gratitude. "Your moral support will help me over a mighty high fence when the time comes to jump it."

"Moral support!" She discounted it for just what it would be worth against Cal Withers, and that was not the force of a sparrow's wing. "You'll need something more than moral support to get that herd back if the judge says Withers's claim is good, and I'm going to be right there to help you!"

"I couldn't fail if I had you to help me," he declared, with fervor equal to her own.

"Have you thought, have you decided,

what you're going to do in case you lose in court, Tom?"

"Nothing has come plain to me yet, Louise. I'm like a man in a storm, waitin' to see a clearin'. It will come to me when it's needed, I expect. But whatever is to be done must wait on the law."

"Of course," she assented gravely. "But there's one thing to remember, when you go down there to look at the cattle tomorrow, and all the time: If you meet Withers, don't start anything. If there's got to be trouble, let him begin it."

"I'll do my best to remember what you've said, Louise, now and at other times, on this subject."

"If you'll wait on Withers to pull his gun first, there'll not be any trouble," she advised him gravely. "I've been finding out a lot about him here lately."

"I'd go away around to keep from havin' open trouble with him, Louise, especially before my case comes off. A fuss might have a bad bearin' on my case."

"And after the case, if you lose it, Tom?"

"A way will be found," Tom answered, his eyebrows drawn, wrinkling his fighting forehead with determined frown.

Chapter X

Tragedy at the Square

PAP COWGILL was off his run for a few days, pending the healing of one of his feet, on which he had dropped a chunk of coal. The company doctor, no other, in fact, than the father of Angus Valorous, had been over to the Cottonwood Hotel to attend the bruised member, leaving a scent of drugs in the parlor. Pap was established in a rocker by the window, his bandaged foot on a hassock made of tomato cans, after the thrifty way of pioneer housekeepers. Pap was comfortable. He enjoyed being crippled; he liked the smell of arnica and carbolated salve. He sat with elbow on the window sill, waving a languid hand to his friends as they passed.

Pap looked at his watch; nine o'clock. He wished his mother or one of the girls would come along so he could send for a cigar. He was entirely able to go and get it out of the showcase himself, but it would be that much more luxurious and enjoyable to have somebody bring it. Louise, preferably. The poorest cigar in the case would taste sweet from her hand. Pap sighed.

Pap sat with watch in his hand, abstractedly turning the stem, rolling it between thumb and finger as if shaping a pill, thinking of a little house he had seen on the hillside in Argentine on his last run, with a for rent sign in the window. Handy place for a man at the end of his run, nice little home for Louise, who wasn't cut out for a biscuit-shooter, take her at her best. Pap thought her inaptitude in that art was blamable to her feet. A girl needed big feet to rush around all day that way, carrying tray loads of grub. But her feet were big enough for all the work she'd have to do when he got his engine; and that was a cinch. She'd have her hired girl and horse and buggy then.

A lot of guys would be hangin' around her when she went on that court house job; and that was a cinch. He'd rather she stayed in the dining-room, only that her health might break, but if any guy got fresh with her up there around the square he'd hear from yours truly. There'd be one advantage in her change of work; she wouldn't be around there to eat supper every evening with that cow jerry. There was a guy that would have to hit the grit; he'd make that plain to the old lady. He wasn't goin' to stand for that Texas guy, moonin' around there like a soft egg.

Pap sat up with a jerk, his ear to the window screen. Sounded like somebody shooting up in the direction of the square There! Three more, as quick— People were running; there were more shots, so fast and so many Pap could not count them. He was gasping with excitement when he kicked the hassock aside. Where in the hell was that overshoe!

Pap went hobbling to the front door, walking on his heel. Mrs. Cowgill had heard the shooting, and the commotion of running feet on the plank sidewalks. Goosie had heard it; Louise had heard. They came crowding to the door, Mrs. Cowgill putting her head out cautiously, her neck stretched to prodigious length, her arm blocking the door to prevent Goosie rushing out into no telling what danger.

But there was no danger near her hand. Mrs. Cowgill went to the porch, where Pap had gone already. Goosie and Louise followed; some who came running from the direction of the depot stopped there,

all of them straining to see what was going on up the street where the public square cut it across with a line of maple trees.

Nothing was to be seen but the outpouring of people, overflowing the sidewalks now, rushing toward the square. The shooting had stopped. Now there was a gust of it again, as if somebody were riding away in defiance, or perhaps triumph, his victim lying stretched in the square. Louise felt her breath die away, her heart sag in sickening pause as if it never could gather momentum to carry life forward again.

Tom Laylander had gone to the bank only a few minutes before, to be there when it opened. He wanted to cash his time check, together with a little draft his mother had sent to help along until the cattle were sold. Tom had looked ready to cry when he told her about it at breakfast. Tom had met Cal Withers and his men. That was the answer to the shooting.

Louise felt it come over her coldly, compressing the warmth out of her body, the blood out of her heart. She pictured Tom lying in the dust, his hat close by, his boyish face turned up to the sun. It was such a terrible, such a poignantly cruel sketching of imagination that the actual could have been little less shocking. A sob that was half a sharp protesting cry, escaped her utmost efforts to choke it down. With her apron around her, just as she had come from work, Louise ran toward the square.

Mrs. Cowgill and Goosie started after her, soon overtook her, and ran with her step for step, the late comers behind them drawing up with great noise over the uneven sidewalk planks. A little way beyond the Racket Store they met Windy Moore, running for the hotel.

"Don't stop me! I'm goin' for my gun!" Windy replied to Mrs. Cowgill's wild appeal for news.

In spite of his great rush, Windy did not appear unwilling to pause for a word or two. No battle that he might fight ever could give him as much pleasure as delivering a piece of news, especially when he was certain his mouth was the first to speak of it.

"What's happened, what's happened?" Mrs. Cowgill pressed.

"Robbed the bank—I'm goin' for my gun!" Windy replied, his eyes big in his meddlesome face.

"Who?" they all asked together, closing around Windy, cutting off his way. Goosie grabbed a handful of the little brakeman's vest, determined to hold him until he had given them all he knew.

"Who—who robbed the bank?"

"That cow jerry, that Texas guy! Sent for his gang, cleaned out the bank, killed the city marshal and the cashier. Oh, hell! Let me go and git my gun!"

"Killed the cashier and the marshal!" Mrs. Cowgill gasped.

The gathering crowd pressed around them. Goosie caught at Windy in her impatience to have it all.

"Who killed them?" she demanded, shaking him as if a grain of truth hid in him somewhere that he was covering wilfully.

"That cow jerry and his gang, I tell you!"

"Who told you?" Louise inquired.

"Told me?" Windy repeated, twisting to break Goosie's hold. "I was there—they took my watch and roll—I tell you I was there!"

Goosie let him go, to stand aghast before Louise, who was so shocked and stunned that even coherent thought was impossible. The press around them was so great now that Windy did not attempt to go on. Those who crowded to get near him appeared to think that he had been the chief actor in whatever had happened, and was coming off victorious from the field.

"Did you say they robbed the bank?" an old man inquired, hand behind his ear.

"Cleaned out every dollar," Windy replied. "I'd just drawed forty dollars, me and three or four others was in the bank, when that cow jerry come in to cash a check. That was a stall, I tell you it was a stall. While the cashier was handin' him out the money his gang rode up and cut loose at everybody in sight, tryin' to drive 'em in. Two of 'em come in the bank and lined us up face to the wall, and while one of 'em held us there the cow jerry and his pardner killed the cashier and put all the money in a sack."

"The marshal got one of 'em!" said a man, pushing in with savage satisfaction.

"But they got him," another added, breathless, panting, dashing away to spread the news.

"Are you sure Tom Laylander was there?" Louise asked, her courage returning with her resentment of the charge.

"I seen him put the money in the sack," Windy declared. "There was four of 'em besides him, two held the horses and two follered him into the bank where he was puttin' up his stall. I saw that cow jerry

take the guns off of his pardner the marshal killed, and hop one of the horses'n ride off with the bunch. They went of rarin' and shootin' at everybody they saw."

Louise went on, not convinced that Windy Moore had seen all the things of which he talked. She hoped to get the straight of it from somebody around the bank.

"Ain't it awful!" Mrs. Cowgill gasped. "And him such a soft-spoken man."

"There's some mistake," Louise declared.

They were obliged to stop at the corner, some distance from the bank, held back by the crowd that stood in front of that building and extended into the street.

"They're pickin' up the marshal!" Mrs. Cowgill whispered. "That's Doc Wilson, the coroner. Oh, ain't it——?"

"There's another one in the wagon!" said Goosie, clutching Louise's arm. "Look at his feet—he's got on cowboy boots! Do you suppose it's the cow—it's *him!*"

"No," said Louise coldly.

"They look like his spurs!" Goosie insisted, with what seemed malicious avidity.

Maud Kelly came pushing her way through the crowd like a man, nearly upsetting some of the ancient citizens who were too absorbed in the proceedings to get out of her fairway. Maud was bareheaded and excited. She came straight to Louise, perhaps not insensible, through all her own perturbation, of the pleading appeal in the girl's white face.

"It'll be all right, honey," said Maud, with futile, cheerless assurance, as one speaks when condoling an irremediable loss. She put her arm around Louise and hugged her in a sort of affectionate fierceness, as if she defied somebody who had dared her to express such sympathy.

"Ain't it awful? Mr. Crowley and the marshal killed!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"Mr. Crowley? Who said he was killed?" Maud inquired.

"We heard they shot him dead."

"There he stands, in the door," said Maud. "Honey, you'd better come on home with me."

Louise faced her with desperate courage, cool now, and controlled, as if she presented herself to the surgeon's knife for an operation that balanced life and death.

"Maud, do you know what really happened?" she asked.

"Yes, I was in the bank."

"You was!" Mrs. Cowgill exploded.

Crowley, the bank cashier, was explaining to his eager patrons the particulars of the robbery. The crowd was divided between him and the melancholy business going forward under the coroner's direction; the four women were left alone at the street corner, where they stood in the dusty roadway of the public square.

"I'd gone to the bank for some silver to make change for the day," Maud said. "Windy Moore and two or three others were there—Tom Laylander at the cashier's window. I don't know just how it happened, it was done so quick, only that two men with guns came bustin' in the bank and lined all of us but Tom Laylander up with faces to the wall. I don't know what happened next, they were shootin' things up so in front of the bank. I looked around to see if they'd killed Mr. Crowley. Two men were in his cage, throwin' everything out of the safe into a sack."

"Was one of them Tom Laylander?" Louise asked, with the breath of what seemed her last hope.

"Honey, I'm afraid it was."

"Puttin' the money in a sack! And him such an honest lookin' boy!"

"Mr. Crowley played dead, layin' flat on the floor, huggin' the wall of the cage," Maud continued, as the surgeon in this desperate case who must push on in excruciating mercy to the end. "They didn't touch him."

"Wasn't that robber holding a gun on Tom Laylander, Maud?" Louise inquired, with the slow, calm surety in her words of a lawyer who has come to the turning-point of his case.

"Honey, I couldn't see from where I stood, and I only had a glance. The one that had us lined up took a shot at me when he saw me look around."

"Took a shot at you!" Goosie exclaimed, with such appreciation that it amounted almost to delight.

"Heaven above!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"It was just a bluff, I guess," said Maud. "It hit the wall a foot or two over my head—my hair's all full of plaster."

She shook her fair crimped hair, leaning over to allow the particles of lime to show-

er down, and laughed a little, although there was no more mirth in the sound than there was in Louise Gardner's downcast heart that moment.

"Do the bank people believe Tom Laylander had a hand in it?" Louise inquired.

"Mr. Crowley thinks it was arranged by somebody on the spot," Maud replied, her head turned, not able to bear the pain her disclosure brought into her friend's strained face.

"And him such a soft-spoken, mild young man!" Mrs. Cowgill said, unable to fit Tom Laylander in the part of bank robber, let circumstances brand him as they might.

"How much money did he take?" Goosie asked.

"I didn't hear," Maud replied distantly.

"This shows banks ain't safe—I always said they wasn't safe," Mrs. Cowgill seemed to exult in the vindication of her years' long contention. "I didn't have any money in it, and I'm glad I didn't. I'll take chances keepin' it in my own safe, any day."

"You'd better come home with me," Maud pressed kindly, taking Louise by the hand.

"Yes, go on home with Maud and lie down and rest and read a book," Mrs. Cowgill urged. "We can make out the rest of the day without you."

"Why should I take a day off, any more than anybody else?" Louise inquired, affecting a cold indifference, as if the complicity of one man more or less in this affair was nothing to her. "I'm not going to shirk on you my last day."

Mrs. Cowgill looked at her curiously, not understanding her in the least. Goosie turned her back, tossing her head a little, the sound of a sniff coming out of her stubby, musical nose. That's what one got for associating with jerries, her unsympathetic attitude seemed to say.

Two little spots of color came into Louise's pale cheeks, a flash into her sorrowful, shocked eyes, lighting her face up defiantly. Yet Goosie's attitude was only a concrete expression of the public belief, as Louise was soon to learn. As the crowd dissolved from the square, scattering in close-talking groups, she heard the term "cow jerry" pass from lip to lip.

Tom Laylander was gone, on a horse brought there by the raiders for him, it was said. And the sheriff, a chicken-faced man with a shallow, slanting forehead and a big mustache, was gathering a posse to pursue him.

Chapter XI

NEWS FROM THE TRAIL

THE McPacken *Daily Gazette*, a little five-column curio such as could not be found throughout the length of newspaper-plastered Kansas today, had much to tell about the raid on the bank that evening. Windy Moore was quoted at length, with embellishments of vocabulary and refinements of diction as surprising to himself as to everybody who knew him; Maud Kelly was quoted, but not to such great length, her plain statement lacking in the picturesque touches which Windy Moore knew how to lay on with artistic hand.

Cashier Crowley was given a chance to explain why he had not grabbed a gun and defended the public's money instead of playing the undignified part of a dead man in this, McPacken's greatest drama. The president of the bank made a statement bearing on the amount carried off by the robbers, which was the vital and important part of the whole story to McPacken.

The banker said the loss would run between forty and fifty thousand dollars; the exact amount would not be known for a day or two, when everything had been checked. A large part of the loss was county funds. There was no insurance. Although the president did not say so, the paper made it plain that things looked rather cloudy for the bank.

Forty men were out, raking the country for trace of the robbers, of whom there were believed to be five, including the one who joined them at McPacken. These searchers were spreading the news at every ranch and cow camp, their numbers increasing as they rode. The gang had an hour, or more, start of the posse at the beginning, their audacious blow had so completely stunned and disorganized the town.

While the *Gazette* was loud in praise of the sheriff's valor and competency, it was low in its hope of results. The robbers had headed south, making for No Man's Land, as the panhandle of what was then the Indian Territory was called. For many years neither territorial nor Federal jurisdiction had been exercised over that narrow neck of country. An outlaw who could gain the cover of No Man's Land was safe from the reach of those on the outside, no

matter what his perils from more desperate refugees within.

The editor of the paper was a careful man, yet he wanted to give all the news and put it as plainly as he could within the limits of libel, in case circumstances might clear up and show public report to be wrong. He did not mention Tom Laylander by name, therefore, but referred to him as "a young Texas cowman who has been around here the past four or five weeks, lately employed on the section as a common laborer."

This young man was defendant in an action to recover on a debt, brought by one of the county's most prominent citizens. It was the general public belief that this young man from Texas, resentful of this lawful reckoning demanded of him, had summoned his outlawed comrades from his notoriously vicious country, and carried out the robbery as a vindictive stroke of retaliation.

It was certain that the outlaw who had fallen by the city marshal's hand was a Texan. Letters and other evidence in his possession established that. It was also established beyond question that the young cowman before alluded to was the man who took the money from the bank's safe and threw it into a grain sack, which grain sack he carried out and flung across the saddle of one of the waiting horses, and rode away with it before him toward the fastness of No Man's Land.

All this, and much more, Louise Gardner read after she had borne her part in serving supper as usual, sitting in her little corner room with one window opening to the west, another to the south. Out of this south window she looked as night fell over the prairie, the confusion of this tragic event upon her. A soft little wind was coming up from No Man's Land, a lonesome, home-yearning touch in it, like a plea from Tom Waylander for an abeyance of judgment.

No Man's Land was not more than sixty miles away, in a southwesterly direction, lying west of the Cherokee Strip. Range horses could cover that distance in a few hours, Louise knew. She felt a little lifting of gladness with the thought that Tom Laylander would have reached and crossed the border of that dark, wild country by now, only to repudiate the feeling the next moment as a traitorous acceptation of his guilt. For she said, and repeated it with obstinate disregard of all argument, proof, circumstance and reason, Tom Laylander was not a guilty man.

Perhaps he had put the money in the robbers' sack; it seemed to be unquestionable that he had gone away with them, as the paper charged. Why he had done this, what circumstance had conspired to force him to do what he had done, she could not understand.

She thought the robbers must have taken him as a hostage, unreasonable, unheard of, as such hypothesis was. Windy Moore's testimony she wiped out with indignant scorn. The whole experience was like the suffocating black struggle of a dream in which a climax never is reached.

Tom had gone away with the robbers, but Tom was not one of them. How she was to establish his innocence in her own reason, how he was to make it clear against public challenge in his own time, she did not know. Only that Tom had gone toward No Man's Land with the robbers, and that he was an innocent man.

She sat looking out of the south window, the south wind in her face, turning it over and over with distracting, heart-wearying, fevered persistence. He was not guilty. And her faith was the only faith that supported Tom Laylander in all McPacken that night.

The posse comitatus came straggling back next day, to be followed along toward evening by the sheriff, who looked as downcast as if he had come from a funeral. It amounted to about that, indeed, for the sheriff's hopes of reëlection. It was disappointing business, being a sheriff in those times, so close to the border of No Man's Land.

Still, the sheriff had not returned without news, although it was not news of his own making. Some cowboys in his posse had found the body of a man a few miles north of the sanctuary of outlawed men. He was a stranger, unknown and unidentified by the cattlemen and herders who used that part of the country. There was a crumpled letter from a woman in a small town of the Brazos country of Texas, entreating him to return home, or send her money. This seemed, to the sheriff, to supply about all that was wanting in his history. Some said he was one of the cowboys who had come to Kansas with Tom Laylander.

The sheriff brought the letter to McPacken; the man they buried where he lay. He had died of a bullet wound, given him by the marshal of McPacken in the battle before the bank door, it was believed.

The other members of the robber gang

had not been sighted by the sheriff, who had turned back at the border. He did not believe in pushing his jurisdiction into the rough hills and scrubby forests of No Man's Land. Any man was as good as a sheriff there, where all men stood together to turn back the arm of the law. Other sheriffs of border counties had not been so wise as this man of McPacken. They had followed trails over the border, and they never had returned.

Two days later a cattleman rode into McPacken with the report of a dead man found a few miles over the line by some of his herders. The fellow had nothing in his possession but a cheap watch, some matches, tobacco and cigarette papers, with the exception of a rough map of McPacken and the roads leading into it. The situation of the bank on the public square was accurately marked. There were two bullet wounds in the man's breast.

The people of McPacken glowed with admiration for their city marshal, who had fallen in vain defense of their money. With the same breath they marveled over the tenacity of life shown by these Texas men. This second bandit was found fully seventy miles from McPacken. The annals of that country did not record an instance where a man had lived to travel that far with two big bullets through him. They lived hard in Texas, and they died hard. And that was a cinch. So everybody said.

The sheriff alone expressed doubt, disbelief. He had been willing to yield the first man to the glory of the dead officer, but he would not go so far with the second one, found away across the line of No Man's Land. He pulled his long mustache, gloom in his eye over the prospect of reëlection, speaking his mind freely on this sowing of dead men along the raiders' trail.

In his opinion it was due to a quarrel among the thieves. That cow jerry's hand was the one scattering this woeful sowing of death, the sheriff said. He had been told, by those who had seen him in action, that he was quicker than any man's eye when it came to slinging out his gun. He had been weeding out the undesirables from his gang, likely with the ultimate purpose of killing them all, leaving no division of the stolen money necessary. It had been done before in the sheriff's time; it was a well-known Texas trick.

Louise Gardner heard all these reports and theories, for the daily paper was supporting the sheriff and picked up every word that he broadcast in the square. Her own conviction of Laylander's innocence had become settled and serene. She had arrived at a theory in the case, which she kept to herself. She did not even repose her confidence in Maud Kelly, with whom she was serving her few days of apprenticeship in the county treasurer's office.

Louise knew that the sheriff's uncharitable hypothesis was true in part. Tom Laylander's hand was the one, indeed, that was dotting the fleeing bandits' trail with dead men.

Chapter XII

Windy Moore's Watch

WINDY MOORE was the herald of adventure. He had been born to announce, rather than to share, the adventures of other men's lives. Added to this distinguishing favor of the gods was a sharp-nosed, gossiping, wide awake disposition for prying into the troubles of other people and spreading them abroad with colors retouched by a reckless imagination. Windy was always on the lookout for a sensation; forever standing sentinel at the outpost of scandal; ceaselessly applying his ear to the window-shutter in sly-footed eavesdropping, his eye to the pane in despicable spying.

Following close on Tom Laylander's prank at Windy's expense, the little brakeman had been promoted from the local run to a high-ball freight. He had made his first run on the new assignment and was back in McPacken for his layover. He had come in about breakfast-time that morning, which was the sixth day after the bank robbery in which Windy had lost his watch and roll.

Windy was so full of importance over his upward step in the calendar of railroad nobility that he could not hide his new brillance in bed very long, no matter for having been awake all the way from Argentine to McPacken the night before. Eleven o'clock saw him out of bed and shaved, and down to the front sidewalk-porch with a pair of blue suspenders, blue sleeve-holders to match, enough pomatum on his sleek, short-cut black hair for two bigger men.

His nellygee shirt, as he called it, was pink-striped. Windy wore it without a

necktie, the soft collar open on his throat, the sleeves turned back midway of his forearms, in the accepted railroad style.

Banjo Gibson was not gracing a bench in front of the hotel that morning; Angus Valorous was still pounding his ear in dreams of conductorial eminence. Windy had the whole thing to himself, a little pink spot against a big green background of hotel. It was a fine arrangement for the vanity of Windy Moore, suitable to his new importance.

Windy had a cigarette plastered to the corner of his sneering, disdainful mouth. What little of the world was not his a man could have put into a gunny sack and carried away. He was ready for the noon whistle, all set and waiting to pass out patronizing nods, high-signs and greetings by word of mouth to the unfortunates tied down to earth in shops and round-house when they came in for dinner.

It wanted a quarter to twelve when Pap Cowgill came limping out of the dining-room, walking with a piece of broom handle to ease the weight from his crippled foot, heading for the cigar case to help himself to the best. Pap was still in the door, his mother and the new biscuit-shooter crossing and recrossing each other in the background, when Windy Moore came in from the porch with a slam of the screen door at his heels. Windy was white to the gills; there was a look about him of a man who had been bitten by a rattlesnake and was racing for the jug.

Pap was as uncertain of Windy's intentions as he was ignorant of the cause of his panic. He thought maybe Windy had swallowed something and was coming for water, or had cut himself and was running for help. Pap side-stepped to let him go by, meeting him at the foot of the stairs, which came down, indeed, just at the side of the dining-room door. Windy jumped in the same direction that Pap sidled, and then, in the foolish way that people do in such sudden and embarrassing situations, they sawed and balanced like partners in a clumsy dance.

"Let me by!" said Windy frantically. "I tell you, let me by!"

"What in the hu-hu-hell's a bitin' you? G-g-go by!" said Pap.

At the same time he stepped this way; Windy sprang in the same direction, nimble as a bee.

"Let me up them stairs!" Windy demanded, sweat on his face, desperation in his breath. "I tell you that cow jerry just rode by—I'm goin' after my gun!"

"The hu-hu-hell you say!" said Pap. He dropped his broom-stick cane and made for the front door in a jump.

Mrs. Cowgill appeared in the dining-room door, a wisp of hair dangling down her face, as usual when she was undergoing the labor of breaking in a new girl. Windy Moore stood with one foot advanced to the first tread of the stairs, but appeared to be in no great rush now to push his way to the top.

"Is he—did you say——?"

"Just rode by," said Windy, still as white as suds. "I'm goin' after my gun!"

He went on, bounding up the stairs like a valiant and determined man. Mrs. Cowgill stood as if stricken; opened her mouth wide, her eyes wider, raising her hands as if she surrendered everything. If expression spoke truly, Mrs. Cowgill did not reserve one little gasp of astonishment for future use.

She followed Pap to the door, Goosie coming running from the dining-room. A cowhand-looking man was riding up the street toward the square, sight common enough, to be sure. Whether he was Tom Laylander, none of them could say. Pap said he'd go up to the square and find out, but he thought Windy Moore had got something crossways in him. Mrs. Cowgill sought to restrain her son, who put her hand away with scorn.

Windy Moore was a good while about getting his gun. Pap was half way to the square, where the rider had disappeared, when Windy came down the stairs with a sideways trip to him that was very neat and elegant.

"Where's he at?" Windy asked, gun in hand, caution restraining him in any headlong dash.

"Gone around the corner," said Goosie, pointing.

"He'll go around another one!" said Windy, a big threat in his voice. He followed Pap, still with a cautious casting around him, an unaccountable deliberation in his pace for an avenger going out with his bulldog in his hip pocket, looking for a man to slay.

Mrs. Cowgill lifted her hands again, opened her mouth and her eyes in repetition of her former silent surrendering up of every emotion of surprise, turned and hurried back to her dining-room to see if the new girl had put on the pickles.

Goosie remained outside a little while, looking up the street, listening, to see and hear if anything broke loose. There was no excitement in town. If the cow jerry

had passed, he had gone by unrecognized by anybody but Windy Moore. Goosie believed Windy had been mistaken, having rather a low regard for his reliability at the best.

Cow jerry, or plain cowhand as the rider might prove to be, the hungry railroaders would break across the yards in a few minutes, coming like a flock of chickens. Dinner must be laid out on the long table, let even Gabriel come riding his white horse up the main street of McPacken.

Crowley, the bank cashier, felt a skittishness come over him every time he saw a big hat come in the door. Yet a man could not very well greet every wearer of a big hat with a gun presented between the bars of the cage, in a country where some of the biggest hats had the biggest accounts. Crowley got the jump of his life as he was arranging things in his cage after the morning rush of business that day.

He had turned to look at the clock—it was ten minutes to twelve—and did not see the man enter the door, which stood open to the breeze, a brick holding it back against the wall. The fellow was half way between the door and Cashier Crowley's window when first seen, coming in softly, as if he walked on his toes. Crowley did not hesitate. He grabbed his gun and leveled it between the shining brass bars.

It was not an unknown face under the big white hat; a good-humored, round, ruddy young face, but with a certain weariness and strain in it, especially around the frank blue eyes. A growth of virile sandy beard, several days old, added a comical roughness to the otherwise ingenuous face. The cashier knew it was not a strange face, but he could not remember where he had seen it before, nor call up a name to fit it. But he didn't like that silent tip-toeing across the floor. It wasn't his day to take another chance.

The visitor did not appear at all impressed by the cashier's gun, nor the desperate look in the man's scared white face. He held up one hand in a gesture of indulgent admonition, grinning a little, the disturbance in his dusty whisker stubs running up to his eyes, making them seem to laugh. The young man was carrying a grain sack, about half full of some lumpy matter; the horse that had brought him there stood before the door.

The president was sitting in his little railed-off place beside the cashier's cage, perplexities marshaled before him in long lines of figures. There was plenty for the president of a bank that had stood a loss of over forty thousand dollars, cash, to think about in a town like McPacken, where the directors were not any too brisk about coming up with an assessment to cover it.

There was a little tin sign with gilt letters tacked on the gate opening into the president's pen, labeling him as neatly as a jar of jam. The man with the grain sack on his shoulder turned from the cashier's hostile embrasure as he read this word PRESIDENT. He turned his back to the cashier's gun with the nonchalance or ignorance of innocence.

That moment the cashier called a sharp warning to his superior, who raised his weary head, and sprang to his feet like a man aroused to flee for his life. He stood with hand on the pistol that lay on the flat desk before him, seeming to wait his moment, rather than to rush to meet it. He was a different sort of man from the one in the cage; a man who would not lift his weapon until he was ready to shoot. So the visitor with the sack on his shoulder said to himself, feeling a warm admiration for the lean, harassed-looking president of the bank.

"What do you want?" the president demanded, as the young man, a stranger to him, approached the rail.

"I just want to turn this money over to you," the stranger replied wearily, as if worn by a thankless vigil over something in which he claimed no share.

"Money? Whose money? What money?"

"That's one of them! That's one of them!" the cashier warned. He came out of his cage, gun in hand.

"Put up that gun, Crowley!" the president ordered, his command sharp as a blow in the cashier's broad flat face.

"They forced me to assist them that morning, sir," the young man said, his voice low in what seemed a shameful confession, the blood of humiliation rising in high tide to his face.

"I see," said the president, but far from seeing, puzzled to get the drift of this extraordinary young man's words.

"It's one of that gang!" the cashier whispered, holding his gun ready to use at the first wink.

"Oh, I see," the president repeated, really beginning to see.

"They got the swing on me and took my gun away from me while I was standin' there cashin' two little checks," the stranger went on. "The amount was a hundred and ten dollars. When you come to it, just lay it to one side for me, please, sir."

The visitor put his sack on the rail near the president's hand, and turned to go his way in the manner of a man whose task was finished.

"You must be Tom Laylander?" said the president, opening the little gate, his hand extended to check the stranger's going.

Tom Laylander stopped, turned again in dignity, his weary body drawn up to the last fraction of an inch that it would stretch.

"Sir, that is my name," he replied.

"Wait a second," the bank official requested, with a little gesture of attention toward the door.

Tom had not noticed before that the beginning of a crowd had collected in front of the bank. He saw Pap Cowgill there, close by the open door, and a man with a badge on his vest, and Windy Moore coming pushing among the others, who seemed to be blowing there like leaves on a sudden gust of wind. Windy had his hand on his hip pocket; he was puffing as if he had run a mile.

Tom understood the president's gesture. It seemed to say, "I believe you, but they want to see the proof before you leave."

The president had taken his knife from his pocket, the sack from the rail, as cool and steady as if about to open a sack of wheat. He cut the string, carried the sack to the middle of the floor and emptied it, full in the sight of such of McPacken as had assembled there, and were coming every second as fast as their shanks could carry them.

"By cripes! There's my watch!" said Windy Moore.

A heap of money, such as few in the

crowd ever had seen before, lay on the bank floor. There were bundles of currency, loose bills flooding them like the sauce of some delectable pudding; several little bags which everybody knew contained gold, a few gleams of white where silver dollars had got mixed in the hasty harvest.

The president stood looking at the heap of money, the empty sack in his hand, his head bent as if overwhelmed by some emotion that he dared not allow the world to see in a bank official's face.

"I think it's all there," said Tom, turning again to go.

"How in God Almighty's world did you do it, Laylander?" the banker asked, wonder so great in him that it was almost awe.

"You'll excuse me for hurryin' off," said Tom, that painful flood of crimson in his face again, "but I think this is the day I've got a case comin' up in court."

The crowd was flooding into the bank, filling the room, gorging the door. The new city marshal, the butt-end of a billiard cue in his hand, pistol by his side, appeared to think this was the proper moment for him to push into the bank and take a hand. Windy Moore and others had been giving him an earful as they stood outside. Following the custom in filling the office of city marshal, the job had been given by the mayor to the next most worthless citizen in town. This fellow was a barber. He had a soapy, sloppy shop next door to the county jail.

This officious person now planted himself in front of Laylander, barring his way to the door, hand laid to his gun.

"You want me to take him up?" he asked the banker.

"Let that man pass!" the banker ordered, something more than authority in his tone.

The city marshal subsided; others drew out of the way. Tom Laylander, his own pistol again in the leather against his leg, hurried out to the court house to see about his case.

Chapter XIII

THE ESSENTIAL EVIDENCE

LOUISE GARDNER had asked the clerk of the court to send word to her in the county treasurer's office when Laylander's case came up for hearing. She understood that his counsel had withdrawn, in the light of Tom's apparent complicity in the bank robbery, leaving him undefended against Cal Withers's claim. She had come to the decision, after

giving it much thought, to make a plea of continuance for Laylander, a bold intention which she kept to herself. For she believed that Tom would come back.

Whether through oversight or indifference, the clerk did not send for Louise. When she left her work with Maud Kelly at noon, they stopped at the court room to make inquiry about the case. It was in progress that moment, Withers's lawyer on his feet making an argument for judgment, against which the judge seemed to be standing out stubbornly, as his low, precise denials of the points raised expressed.

Louise told Maud that she intended to stop there and hear the end of it. Maud, always savagely hungry, and little interested in Tom Laylander's loss or gain, went on to lunch, while Louise slipped into the court room and down to the front, where she sat, far more conspicuously than she desired, among the empty benches.

It was not an interesting case; everybody in McPacken knew, or believed they knew, how it would end from the first. Besides, it takes something more than a civil suit, even involving a supposed fugitive from justice, to hold people when dinner is ready.

"But that is not the point, Mr. McSweeny," said the judge, patient in the repetition of a thing the wilful attorney was determined to have his way, justice or injustice, law or no law. "You have not made your case, you cannot make your case, without the essential evidence."

"We are unable to produce it, as your honor knows," the attorney returned pettishly. "If we had the note, we certainly would introduce it. We're not holding it out just to give us a chance to stand up here and talk."

"You haven't introduced any evidence, except the testimony of the plaintiff, to prove that the note ever was in existence," said the court.

"It was our opinion that the testimony of a man of my client's standing in this community would be sufficient," the lawyer returned, bitterly sarcastic.

"The court regrets to say that it is not."

"We can summon witnesses to prove the existence of this note, and that it is lost beyond the power of mortal man to produce."

"You should have done so," said the court.

"This defendant, Laylander, is a fugitive from justice. He never had any standing in this community, he wouldn't have any standing in this court if he was here. It is preposterous of your honor, if you will permit me to say so——"

"It seems you have said it without permission, Mr. McSweeny," said the court, undisturbed.

"To ask us to produce proof of the existence of this note."

"It is quite reasonable, Mr. McSweeny," the court corrected him, with some show of rising temper. "The note itself is the essential evidence in an action of this character."

"It is a fact just as well established, your honor, that the loss of a note does not release the maker of it from payment."

"That is very true. All the court requires is proof, in the absence of the essential document itself, that such a note existed; that it was a valid note at the time this action was brought. The court will give you—three days, Mr. McSweeny, to produce such evidence. I make the time short on account of the heavy expense accruing against the attached property. Will that be long enough for you?"

Here the judge looked across the bench with a frown, displeased by the sudden invasion of his quiet room by what seemed a holiday crowd of people, male and female. The city marshal was among them, the president of the bank was there. Maud Kelly had been caught in the sudden current and carried back.

The case of Withers against Laylander seemed to have assumed a sudden importance in the public regard. It was as if the gate of a pasture had been opened, letting out a herd of famished cattle to water. The judge withheld the proceedings while the benches filled speedily with excited, whispering people. The attorney for the plaintiff stood with a frown of annoyance on his face.

"Mr. Sheriff," said the judge, looking around for that dignitary, "Mr. Sheriff," a little louder, "let us have quiet."

The sheriff had been dozing at a table near the clerk, his long body slid downward in his chair to bring his head to easy rest on the back of it, his long legs under the table. He came up like a man from a dive, amazement, bewilderment, in his simple face. He rose, rapping the table with his fist. He did not call for order; just looked around with a threat that seemed to command it, and sat down again, well satisfied with himself and the result.

"If your honor please," said a soft, deferential voice up the aisle about midway of the room.

"What is it?" asked the judge, very severe, very much displeased.

The speaker advanced toward the bench, walking on tiptoes, hat under his arm, a big pistol flapping against his thigh. The sheriff rose, leaning forward with hands on the table, the color running out of his face. He was in the aisle with a bound, confronting Tom Laylander, gun thrown down on him, desperate intention in his face.

"Put 'em up!" he commanded.

Laylander raised his hands, dropping his hat. The sheriff leaned far, and drew Tom's pistol out of the holster, breathing easier when he had it clear. He edged around behind Tom, indicating that he was to advance toward the amazed judge.

"Your honor, this is that feller Laylander," the sheriff explained.

People in the room made a stirring among the benches, some of them rising from crouching behind them, standing now, stretching to see.

"We must have order here!" the judge commanded.

Louise started forward as if to protest against this outrageous action on the sheriff's part, as she felt it to be. She did not know where Tom Laylander had been, or what perils he had passed, but the look of weariness in his face told her that it had been far, his dangers many and grave. Her heart seemed to rise and exult for him, walking in the boldness of innocence among those who had accused and slandered him.

She remained standing, unaware of her conspicuous situation, until she saw that attention was being divided between her and the sheriff's prisoner. She believed Tom had not seen her when he passed down the aisle, yet hoped that he had. She wanted him to know that in the face of public distrust and hostility as expressed by Withers's lawyer and the sheriff's action, one in McPacken believed in him and held his interest at heart.

Cal Withers was whispering to his attorney, who leaned over the table to hear. The cowman's spirit seemed uneasy within him; he threw his hand to the place where his gun usually hung, feeling stripped and exposed to the danger of sudden death when he thought of the weapon outside in the sheriff's office. The judge indicated by a movement of his hand that the sheriff was to stand aside.

"You started to address the court; is there something you want to say? Are you Thomas Laylander, defendant in the case now being heard?"

"Yes sir, your honor, I am. I didn't know it was an offense to come into court with a gun on me—I didn't even remember I had it," said Tom, unable to account for his reception in any other way.

"I guess you can put that pistol down, Mr. Sheriff," the judge suggested, rather than ordered.

"I was some distance away," Tom explained. "I got here as soon as I could."

Judson Weaver, president of the bank, came down the aisle, stopped at the sacred little enclosure in which the attorneys' tables stood, standing as if he had something that he desired to say. The court did not appear to notice him, due perhaps to the swirl of surprising conjectures revolving on this defendant's remarkable and unlooked for appearance.

"Your attorney has withdrawn from the case," said the judge. "He turned over your retainer to the clerk of this court, who holds it at your order."

"I guess maybe I can get along without a lawyer of that kind, and be better off," said Tom.

"Your case," said the judge, cold and stern, "is at this point: The plaintiff is unable to produce the note upon which the action for recovery rests. As you perhaps understand, the note itself is the best evidence in such an action, but judgment may be allowed on the presentation of evidence to establish the existence of such note, and proof of its validity at the time the suit was instituted. The court has granted the plaintiff three days' time to gather and present such evidence. There the matter for the present rests."

"Yes, sir, your honor. I came in just when this lawyer was arguin', makin' mention of me in a slanderous way I'll have to call on him to explain. I understood from your reply to that rascal, sir, that the note was lost. I wanted to speak to the court, sir, to state that I've got the note, right here, your honor, sir. There's no use delayin' the case on account of the note bein' missin'. Here it is."

Tom handed the note to the astounded judge. The equally astonished crowd rustled and shifted, creaking the benches in the strain of bringing eyes and ears a few

inches closer to the scene of these remarkable proceedings. Louise sprang up, tense, surging hot with protest against Tom's apparent folly in thus surrendering himself into his enemies' hands. Withers's lawyer was up, hand flung out in protesting gesture.

"If that is the note, and it may well be our note, this—this—person having had access to it lately, we protest against alterations and erasures, cancellations or other marks whatever, that would tend to show payment."

"There are no marks on it, Mr. McSweeny, except some notations on the back which may indicate interest payments," said the judge.

The judge sat holding the note before him, looking curiously at Tom Laylander, who had gone back to take his hat from a man and thank him for picking it up. Presently he passed the note, abstractedly, without following the act with his eyes, to Withers's lawyer. Those two immediately went into conference over it, whispering, passing it from hand to hand. Satisfaction settled into their countenances with the quieting of their fears.

Louise sat down again, throbbing and indignant, half scornful of Laylander in spite of her admiration. Why had he been so foolish? Why had he given the note to them? Or perhaps not so foolish, after all. This thought came up to plead for Tom, out of her deep knowledge of his worthiness. Maybe the note was valueless; perhaps it was all the evidence Tom needed to win his case. Withers's lawyer was standing again, the note in his hand.

"Since the defendant is in court, and the note is in evidence, with notations of interest payments by my client, showing that interest was paid on it within the past five years, establishing its validity beyond any and all question; since all these matters and facts are before the court, we ask that the case proceed. Mr. Withers will resume the stand and make formal identification of this note."

"Court is adjourned till two o'clock," said the judge, passing over the lawyer as if he was not, never had been nor ever was expected to be.

The sheriff didn't know just what his own next move was to be in the case of Laylander. He was trying to get the prosecuting attorney's eye, with a view to a warrant. The judge came down from the bench, Banker Weaver went forward to meet him. The crowd pressed Louise along the aisle to the lawyers' enclosure, space sacred no longer to only licensed feet.

"How is this, Laylander? How did you come to have possession of that note?" the judge asked, now in his capacity of perplexed citizen, a state none the less vexing than that of perplexed judge.

"It was among some papers thrown away by the scoundrels that held us up here the other day, sir."

"I see," said the judge. "You've been following that gang of bank robbers, have you? You're the man that's been picking them off along the road. I see."

Tom said nothing. He stood hanging his head as if he had been rebuked, his fair hair rumpled, dust gray in his stubble of beard, confusion over him. Louise stood behind him, a yearning in her to call his name, to give him her hands, to say something endearing that would have been incongruously out of place, and made the crowd laugh.

Judson Weaver told the judge of Tom's arrival at the bank with the money. He spared nothing of the obligation that he, and his institution, stood under to Tom Laylander. It was an obligation, he said, that every man in McPacken shared.

The judge listened to the story with growing amazement. The sheriff stood leaning his hands on the table, looking like a giraffe with its feet on a rock, his long neck stretched, his eyes crowded out by the wonder that was so big inside of him that atmospheric pressure seemed insufficient to prevent him from bursting on the spot. He was the most astonished sheriff that ever lived.

"He took the guns off of the one that fell in front of the bank, hopped his horse and rode after them, all so quick we thought he was one of the gang," the banker said.

Tom looked up quickly. Louise strained a little nearer, leaning as if to compel him to feel her presence there.

"There was just a rifle, sir," Tom corrected the banker. "It's down there with his horse. It's a slow horse, sir, but it's an endurin' one."

"It was a remarkable thing for one man to strike out after that gang alone and come back alive," the judge marveled. "Why didn't you wait for the rest?"

"I was so mortified over them takin' my gun away from me and makin' me help

pick up the money I couldn't hardly see," said Tom. His tone and manner seemed an apology to the sheriff, and everybody in McPacken, for rushing off that way ahead of the posse.

"How he got the money away from them before they split it and scattered, how he ever came back at all, God only knows!" the banker said.

"You've been a pretty badly slandered man in this community, Tom Laylander," the judge said. "There wasn't a soul in this town with brains enough to understand."

"I think there was one—or two," said Tom, attaching the amendment as if to divide public conjecture, it seemed.

Tom turned his head a little, with a quick, searching movement, and there was Louise. There was Louise, just at his shoulder, all looking out of her eyes that her tongue could not frame one little word to say.

"Yes," said the wise judge, turning away to leave them a little more alone, "there was one."

Tom was holding her hands, having trouble to force a smile, seeing her twitching lips, the stricken whiteness of her face, the joyful admiration of her eyes, her pride so great that it struggled in her bosom with the constraint of pain.

"Why, Miss Louise!" said Tom. "Don't you cry!"

Chapter XIV

An Old Axiom Explodes

IT WAS honesty, but a foolish piece of honesty. That was what McPacken said. It cost Tom Laylander his case. If he had burned that note when he found it beside the bandits' campfire along with other discarded notes, bonds and papers, he'd have won back his cattle. Any sensible man would have burned it, said the public of McPacken. There was such a thing as carrying this honesty game too far.

There was nothing for the judge to do, under the law, but decide the case against Tom. There was the note in evidence, notations on the back of it in indelible pencil made by the hand of Cal Withers, recording payment of interest within five years, thus keeping it from becoming invalid by limitation. The judgment was entered accordingly, and the herd ordered sold at public auction by the sheriff.

Withers's lawyer passed Tom as he was leaving the courtroom in a slow, dazed way. The lawyer carried books under his arm, as lawyers of his calibre always do. He looked at Laylander with a sort of baffled curiosity, glowing with pride in his good fee and easy victory.

"Why didn't you tear that note up, Laylander?" he asked loudly. "Then you'd 'a' had us."

"No gentleman would have thought of it, sir," Tom replied, with dignity and severity alike lost on a conscience that never had been big enough to give its owner any trouble.

Louise was not in court to hear the case go against Tom, it being a Saturday afternoon, with many ranchers in to pay their taxes. Besides, it was Maud Kelly's last day in the office. She was closing up her affairs preparatory to taking her two weeks' vacation, at the end of which time Louise was to succeed her. Tom was rather glad than sorry that she had not been present to witness his defeat. He returned to the hotel with a smile for Mrs. Cowgill on the bench beside her door, the void of his great disappointment and loss hidden under his cougar-skin vest.

"Well, Tom, did you beat him?" Mrs. Cowgill inquired, lively interest in her thin face.

"No, ma'am, I didn't beat him yet."

Tom stopped before her, hat off in his respectful way that Mrs. Cowgill admired so greatly, and prized all the more highly when she was the object of it.

"Didn't the judge decide it yet?"

"Yees, he decided it, ma'am. Colonel Withers won this throw. The judge ordered the sheriff to put my herd up for sale at public auction ten days from today."

Mrs. Cowgill looked at Tom with consternation making her gaunt eyes wide. It appeared as if he had brought her news of a personal loss, her perturbation and concern so far outweighed any outward indication of his own.

"Can't you stop them? Are you goin' to let that old rascal beat you out of your cattle that way?"

"I can stop the sale for a while if I appeal. But Mr. Weaver, over at the bank, says he don't believe it would do a bit of good to appeal the case. It looks like I'm knocked out for a little while."

"Well, you take it mighty easy!" she said. "They say them cattle's worth twenty thousand dollars, if a cent. I guess if I was to lose twenty dollars you could hear me from here to the court house."

"Ladies are a little different, I reckon, ma'am," Tom allowed.

"You ought 'a' called for a jury—that's what Myron said at dinner, and he reads the papers, he knows that, if he don't know much else. It oughtn't never 'a' been left to the judge. If you'd 'a' had a jury you'd 'a' sure beat him, with folks in this town knowin' what you've done for them, bringin' back all that money. They say every dollar of it was there. Windy Moore got his back, and his watch. Here he comes now."

Tom had taken a seat beside Mrs. Cowgill at her signaled invitation, where he sat in a tentative, uncomfortable way, well forward on the bench, hat in hand, as if he expected to jump up the next minute and run away. Windy Moore approached in all the refinement and elegance of his pink-striped nellygee, to which he had added a blue-and-white polka dot necktie.

"Well, Tom," said Windy, coming up in breezy justification of his name, hand out in extreme affability, "I'm not like the feller that can't overlook a joke. Glad to see you back—much obliged to you for bringin' me my watch and roll."

Tom got up, beaming with pleasure. He grasped the little brakeman's hand with the grip of genuine cordiality and joy, clinging to it as if somebody who had strayed away had come back again, redeeming the desolation of his life.

"I'm sure glad to see you, Mr. Moore," he declared, clinging to Windy's hand like a politician. "I sure am mighty glad!"

"Much obliged to you for bringin' me my watch and roll," Windy repeated, bound to pay his debt in an open and public manner, and have done with it there and then, nothing left hanging over to disquiet him in days to come. He was a little superior in spite of his down-bending, a little bit lofty and off-handed, as became a brakeman on a high-ball freight.

Windy sat down on the bench, with Tom between him and Mrs. Cowgill, got out his store cigarettes, which Tom could not refuse for fear of offending him, although he bore a scornful prejudice against any but the kind a man poured and rolled for himself. Mrs. Cowgill's surprise was as great when Tom asked her permission to smoke as if her man Myron had gone to work without being told. Windy Moore looked at him curiously, too, somewhat in contempt for his airs and his weakness.

"They tell me they beat you on that cattle case," said Windy, his trousers pulled up at the knees so high that he looked like a poodle dog about the legs.

"Yes, I lost on this throw," said Tom, speaking as if he had something in reserve, as he had spoken to Mrs. Cowgill a little while before.

"It's a darn stinkin' shame!" said Windy, whose diction was not so elegant out of the newspaper as it was in it. "I'd fight it to the supreme court if it was my case, I wouldn't throw down my hand for no decision like that. If you want money to carry it up, us fellers here in McPacken we'll see that you get it, and that ain't no lie!"

"I appreciate what you say, Mr. Moore; I appreciate it past all words. But I'm told I wouldn't gain anything but delay by makin' an appeal. The higher court couldn't do a thing to help me."

"Where you made your mistake," said Windy, "was when you handed that note over to them fellers. If you'd 'a' put a match to it that would 'a' been the end of it. You'd 'a' had your cows, right now."

"That's what I said when I heard of it," Mrs. Cowgill hastened to throw her stone of condemnation on this poor, bruised, pitiful little act of honor and honesty. "Let me get my hands on a note I've given anybody, and see what'll happen to it!"

Tom looked at her with a grin, which was a weak attempt to discredit her declaration, trying to tell her that he knew very well she'd hand it back to the owner and pay him like a little man, although he felt under the skin that she wouldn't do anything of the sort.

"Maybe I was kind of foolish," he admitted, "but I always was that way."

Tom wanted to get away from them, and the discussion of his loss. Their regretful condemnation of what, to him, was merely a simple act of honesty, was hard to bear in silence. Yet he knew that any attempt to defend his ethical code would only subject him to further pitying correction. According to the view of Mrs. Cowgill and Windy Moore, which might be accepted as the view in epitome of all McPacken, a man who lacked the sense to be dishonest to his own profit ought to be looked after and taken in hand.

Mrs. Cowgill relieved him of her presence and her comments after a while, but Windy Moore stuck. To Tom's great satisfaction Windy turned the talk to himself and his new consequence as soon as Mrs. Cowgill left them, keeping it up un-

til the shop's whistle sounded the close of the working day. He advised Tom to get out of the cattle business, now that mischance seemed to have put him out, and get a job as brakeman. He offered to go with him to the superintendent and boost for him from the eminence of his influence.

Tom was grateful for the suggestion and offer of friendly service. After a while, when the law got through with his cattle, he'd be glad to consider it, he said. Right now he was not going to try for any kind of a job. Maybe, after all, he'd have to go to the range, for he didn't seem to have the railroading streak in his blood.

All of which Windy Moore argued down and out, enlarging on the respectability, the manliness, the importance to the national welfare, of a railroad job. Meaning by a railroad job, a job of no lower grade than brakeman, to be sure.

Windy had played his hand to hold Tom there beside him for the swelling satisfaction of being seen in his company by the shop mechanics and roundhouse men when they came in for supper. The news of the cow jerry's return with the money stolen from the bank had found its way into every ear in McPacken long before the whistle blew. Nearly everybody felt a personal interest in the event, for the question of the ability of the bank to make good the depositors' loss had been an open one, with a doubtful issue. The recovery of the money made everybody secure. It was a happy day.

The railroaders were frank in their praise, hearty in their handshakes, from all of which Tom would have escaped if he could. But Windy Moore had him on exhibition at the hotel door, presiding over the affair with a bearing of proprietorship. One might have concluded that Windy had been the leading spirit in that long and perilous pursuit, concerning which no man was able at that time, nor ever after, to draw one word out of Tom Laylander's mouth.

Tom got away from them at last, for gratitude is quickly expressed and done with, but hunger of a railroad man requires steak and onions to appease. He was going toward the court house in quest of Louise when he met her. They returned together to the hotel.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said.

"I knew you would be," he replied.

"This ends it, I suppose?" she ventured. "They say up at the court house an appeal wouldn't do any good."

"It only begins it, Louise. He's won the first hand; that's all."

"Why, Tom," eagerly, a big hope lighting in her eyes, her hand on his arm, "what are you going to do? What is there you can do?"

Tom looked down into her eyes with a great tenderness in his pink boyish face.

"I'm goin' to wait till the law gets through with my herd, Louise," he replied, so much more unsaid than said, yet altogether clouded in his mysterious reticence.

"We'll talk it over at supper," she said, flitting off upstairs.

Several railroad men collected quickly about Tom, many of them familiar with his name whom he never had seen before, or had forgotten as incidentals in the general railroad pattern of the town. Some whom he knew to be conductors and engineers, who never had tipped him as much as a nod when he served on the section under Orrin Smith, greeted him like a member of the brotherhood now. That they were sincere about it Tom did not doubt, and would have been wrong if he had admitted such a thought into his ingenuous head.

He was a man who had been in bad company through innocence, rather than depravity, their attitude seemed to say, when he had labored on the section. That was all past and forgiven. The taint of jerry was no longer on his hands.

They repeated, with great earnestness and the pulling out of wallets, the declaration of Windy Moore that all the funds he might need to appeal his case were ready to his hand. More than that: if he wanted to organize a crowd to raid Cal Withers and shoot him off the face of the earth, they were with him; or to ride out and take his cattle away from the sheriff, load them and ship them out of the state, they were ready to get their guns and go. That they meant it, was as plain as the buttons on their coats.

Louise came down while they stood around Tom, their wallets and their rolls in their hands. And that was the interesting juncture at which Banjo Gibson emerged from the dining-room.

"Why, hel-l-l-o, Tom!" Banjo greeted him, nearly bursting the buttons off his stiff-bosomed shirt with his swelling. He

came forward offering his hand, his resonant voice loud in the office.

Laylander met his friendly advance with a peculiar kindling of humor and affront in his ruddy countenance. Banjo was before him, full of voluble expostulations of his unbounded joy, his notable banjo-picking right hand offered in jubilant salute. Laylander reached into the pocket of his cougar-skin vest, and bestowed some trifle in the hand of Banjo Gibson with as much indifference as he would throw a base coin to an aggressive beggar. He turned then with a soft word of excuse to the new friends, and genuine, who had come forward in his hour of need, held the dining-room door open to Louise, and left Banjo Gibson looking foolishly at a dime in the palm of his famous banjo-picking palm.

"The presence of that ornery little man, wantin' to shake hands with me!" said Tom. "Only a little while ago he snubbed me like I was a nigger when I come in from work on the section."

Banjo Gibson's loud, contagious laugh seemed to answer from the office. He was not to be humbled, not to be outdone. He was passing it off before the engineers and conductors as a rare and mighty joke.

The new girl, heavy as a plow-horse, came to wait on Louise and Tom as they sat at his old table in the far corner by the window. Myron was engaged with a scythe among the tall weeds on the back of the hotel lot; a smell of fresh-cut jimson and cockleburr came in on the breeze.

The court decision weighed heavier on Louise than Tom. She was downcast and sad; tears were at the brim of her eyes. But indignation against the injustice of the matter was stronger in her breast than grief. She flushed to a fighting heat as they talked it over, Tom glad that she was too generous to arraign him for his weakness, as McPacken in general considered it, in surrendering the note.

"They say Withers will be the only bidder when the cattle are put up under the judgment for sale," she said.

"That's generally the case," Tom told her, having seen many such judgments satisfied in his day. "It would be foolish for me to bid on my own property, and nobody else would want to speculate ten thousand dollars and costs on that herd right now. Withers will pay the costs and take the herd over. That's the way they work it."

"But what are you going to do, Tom?"

"I'm goin' to wait till the law gets through, Louise," he replied, and would reveal no more of his intention than that.

Mrs. Cowgill came through the swinging door from the office, showing in Judson Weaver. Instead of putting him down at one of the tables reserved for guests of such consequence, she headed straight for the obscure corner where were Tom and Louise. There Mrs. Cowgill stopped, spreading her hands in a gesture of delivery, her eyes lively with expectancy, her smile as broad as it would go.

"Sit still, sit still," the bank president protested, as Tom started to rise. "I'm not going to stop, I just ran in on my way home for a word with you."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, standing half up and half down, about as awkward and embarrassed a young man as ever came off the Texas range.

"Our directors voted you a little expression of our appreciation this afternoon, Tom, which it is my great pleasure to put into your hand," the banker said.

It was a check for a thousand dollars. The banker put it on the corner of the table, seeing that Tom seemed to have no hand under control to reach out and take it. Mrs. Cowgill leaned over and looked at it, lifted her hands in her gesture of absolute surrender, opened her mouth in soundless astonishment, and stood posed that way, waiting for Tom to pick it up.

"Why, sir, I couldn't begin to accept of it!" said Tom.

"My-y-y lands!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

"We realize that money can't pay you for the service you've done us," the banker continued, trying to make it easier for Tom, it seemed. "Our appreciation goes with the check, our unbounded admiration and respect."

"That's worth more to me than any amount of money, sir," Tom replied, with simple dignity, simple sincerity. "Please hand this check back to the directors with my thanks. I couldn't think of accepting of it, sir."

"My-y-y lands, but you're easy!" Mrs. Cowgill said.

Louise took up the check, seeing the banker's embarrassment, and handed it back to him with a smile.

"Please put it on deposit to his account Mr. Weaver," Louise requested, such a red rush of blood rising to her face that the last tear in her eyes must have been evaporated as if dropped on Mrs. Cowgill's range.

"Good!" said the banker. "Endorse it

for him," offering his pen with a broad smile. "Now, that settles it."

"I couldn't begin to think of ever drawin' on it," Tom protested.

"Keep still," the banker advised, "and let your manager do the talking when there's any to be done. You need one as bad as anybody I ever saw, and I'm glad you've got a good one."

He gave Tom a slap on the shoulder, and Louise a knowing look, going his way with a grin, deaf to Tom's protestations that he never would touch a cent of it.

"Well, you are easy!" Mrs. Cowgill said, hurrying off after the banker as if the thousand dollar check in his pocket were a magnet that would draw her to the end of the world and over the edge.

Tom knew that she meant he was a bigger fool than she had thought any man of his size could possibly be. Louise looked at him tenderly. Tom felt that it was just as Judson Weaver had said. He was entirely in her hands.

"Get your hat," Louise directed him. "Let's take a walk down toward the river."

"Yes, Miss Louise."

"Oh, don't 'Miss Louise' me, Tom," she corrected, but with such great tenderness for his lubberly ways that it was almost a caress.

"No, ma'am," said Tom contritely, coming up very red with his hat.

Chapter XV

A PRAIRIE MANSION

THIRTY-odd miles to her brother's ranch down near the line of the Nation was nothing to Maud Kelly. She appeared at the hotel on Sunday morning in a buckboard with her valise lashed to its slatted deck, a spunky span of young horses fretting at the stop, to pick up Louise and carry her away into the cowboy-infested wilds.

Maud wanted Tom Laylander to go along, insisting that the seat was plenty wide enough for three. When Tom expressed doubt of the comfort they would have with him crowding in, Maud suggested that she and Louise could take turn about sitting on his lap, to ease the crowding and give them elbow room.

If anything had been lacking to keep Tom out of the expedition, Maud's ingenuous proposal settled it for him. He backed off, fairly crippled by confusion. Louise had better success. She suggested a ride down to visit them at the ranch, to which Tom agreed. He said he would be going down in that direction to look over his cattle and see how they were filling out in a day or two. He'd be proud to ride on down to the ranch.

As the girls drove away, Tom waving them farewell from the hotel corner with his hat, they talked of the way he still claimed ownership of the cattle, neither of them able to account for his apparent stupidity in clinging to something that was already hopelessly lost. He seemed just as much interested in the cattle as if nothing had happened. Whether it was his simplicity, sustained by some glamorous hope, or some deep intention of an act of reprisal against Withers, they could not understand.

"I'd like to help the kid out," said Maud, who was cattle-wise, as well as worldly-wise.

"It looks hopeless," Louise declared. "He's so touchy about taking anything from anybody, even help. If anybody ever helps Tom Laylander they'll have to put it over on him in the dark."

"He'd just as well go on down there and kiss them cows good-by, they're the same as Cal Withers's now. But say; I wonder!"

"You wonder what, Maud?"

"I was just thinkin'. I believe I know where the sheriff's got that herd—it must be down a few miles from Jim's ranch. Jim could be trusted to go in on anything that would soak old Cal Withers; he owes that old boy one that he's been itchin' a long time to pay."

"What's your scheme, Maud?"

"I'm not sayin' much about it right now, kid," Maud said, but with a grin on her big honest mouth as she turned a roguish eye to Louise. "Somebody's got to help that red-headed boy out of his troubles."

"It isn't just what you could call red, Maud," Louise corrected, knowing very well that her face was positively so.

"Near enough to pass. He'll be down tomorrow."

"I don't know."

"Sure he will. He can take a hand—no, he can't, but he can sit in the hammock and hold yours. That'll leave me alone to work out my desperate scheme."

"How about Mr. Cook?"

"Mr. Cook?" Maud repeated blankly. "Who's Mr. Cook?"

"Why, the man you're going to marry —the baggage——"

"Oh, you mean Sam. He'll not be down; he's got his orders, straight from headquarters, to give me a rest for two solid weeks."

There was not much more of a road going down to Jim Kelly's ranch than a ship leaves after it on the sea. Every driver struck a course to suit his own pleasure in the vastness of that untrammeled country. Sometimes Maud followed where somebody else had gone, again she drove for miles where a wheel seemed never to have pressed before.

It was a broken prairie, thrown in easy-rising long ridges, gently heaving, like nothing so much as an ocean whose swells had been fixed in grassy undulations. At a distance the prairie appeared level to the eye, the farthest bound of the vision defined sharply, as the horizon comes down upon the sea. The ridges were bare of all growth except short buffalo grass, grayish-green in this summer season, brighter in the swales, where clumps of wild briars and fire-stunted shrubs huddled as if hiding away out of the incessant wind.

They passed a few sod ranch-houses, out of which children came running to pile up against the wire fences and stare, like tumble-weeds rolled up and lodged by the wind. Women sometimes appeared in the dark doors to wave greeting to Maud. Distant herds were spread wide over the gray pasture lands. It was a melancholy country, a lonely and depressing ride. At least Louise found it so. To Maud it was home, with nothing more remarkable nor peculiar about it than home has for anybody, anywhere.

Toward evening, the whole day being consumed in the leisurely drive, they struck Tom Laylander's herd, watched over by two young men who came galloping when Maud pulled up and waved her hat. They were lonesome and tired of their job, neither of them being a range man. As a regular business, one was employed in the livery stable at McPacken, the other as office deputy by the sheriff. They had a chuck-wagon and a negro cook over on a little creek among the trees, they said.

Maud expressed surprise that they two were alone with the cattle, the report in McPacken being that no fewer than ten men were holding them. There had been more, the herders said; the sheriff had called them off to chase the bank robbers, and they never had come back. Sick of the job, just like themselves, the office man said; glad to get back to town, and stay there. Nothing to it down there on the edge of nowhere watching a lot of fool cows at two dollars a day. A man could make more than that shootin' pool up in town.

"Just as well not have us here, they go where they darn please, anyhow," the youth complained.

"That's right," Maud agreed. "There's no more need for a man along with a bunch of cattle this time of the year, especially a little bunch like this, than I've got for a nurse. How's the grub?"

"Bum!" said the office man, with explosive disgust. "I'd give six dollars for a dish of steak and onions like you used to bring us up at the hotel, Louise."

"That's one of the luxuries of your past that you'll never enjoy from my fine Italian hand again," Louise told him. "There's another lady on that job now."

"You don't mean to tell me you've quit the hotel, Louise?"

"Yes, I'm a tax-eater now, the same as you."

"Court house job, you mean, Louise?"

"Sure," said Maud. "She's got my job."

The young man was voluble in his congratulations. He was also somewhat astonished by the sudden and spectacular rise of a biscuit-shooter to a position at the public manger. But he was shrewd enough to run the mystery of her rise quickly to its source. That source was old man Kelly. He was still a dictator in the party councils of that county. So there was nothing extraordinary about it after all, except that a girl whom he had counted in as just a common sort with an uncommonly handsome figure and face, should spring at a bound from the bottom of the social ladder in McPacken to the very top. She would be worth cultivating when he went back to his clean and easy job. The young man made a large and impressive note of that.

"We're going to be down at Jim's for a week or so. Maybe we can cheer you up a little until the cattle are sold," Maud suggested.

The deputy sheriffs had not heard of the court decision, although they had expected it would go that way. It cheered them greatly to learn that their unremunerative and unromantic employment was nearly at an end.

"We're going to have a little dance over at Jim's tomorrow night," Maud announced, although it was news to Louise.

"Round up your cows so the cook can keep his eye on 'em and come over."

Sure they would, they promised. The fool cows didn't need any watching, not at night, anyhow. Nobody ever watched them at night—what was the sense? When they got ready to bunk, they bunked, and when they wanted to get up and snort around they didn't wait for no little cowboy to come and call them. Sure they'd come. They'd wear the girls' feet off up to their knees dancin', and that wasn't no lie.

"You know where Jim's ranch is? Down here about four miles," said Maud.

Sure they knew where it was. Them fool cows had roamed off down there a day or two ago, and stood with their necks over Jim's fence like they'd come home and found the door locked. They'd hung around there till Jim's wife had come out with the broom and run 'em off. Sure they'd come. Ten to one them darn cows would foller them, and line up along the fence.

"That's a good looking bunch of cattle, surprising good," said Maud, as they drove along the edge of the scattered herd. "It's a darn shame that kid's got to lose 'em, they'd sell for forty to forty-five a head right now."

"Tom said he believed they'd net twenty thousand dollars on the Kansas City market," Louise sighed. "It's a lot of money to be swindled out of."

"Ye-es," Maud drawled, her eyes fixed on a point miles ahead, as if making a far-off calculation of her own.

"I never heard anything about a dance tomorrow night," said Louise.

"Neither did I," Maud replied, "but you heard what I said."

"Where are you going to scare up enough people for a dance in this country?"

"There'll be you and I and Jinny, Jim's wife, for a starter, right on the spot. We'll shoot around tomorrow and spread the alarm. It'll surprise you how many girls will jump up out of the short grass down here."

"But what's the scheme, Maud?"

"Entertainment, my darling; entertainment for two poor little cowboys far away from the pool hall at McPacken."

Jim Kelly's house was built of straight up-and-down planks, stripped with battens, like a barn. It was not as comfortable as a sod house, and nothing could have been more unattractive, its raw planks stark and unpainted against the harmony of gray prairie and blue sky in that treeless immensity. But it was a mark of affluence and superiority to live in a plank house where sod houses were the rule.

Kelly's house was a notable one on the old cattle trail leading from Texas through the Cherokee Outlet; there was nothing as grand or as costly within many a day's travel to the south. The material had been freighted from McPacken, in itself not much of a task, the house knocked together like a huge box without foundation or previous leveling of the land. There were irregular pillars of rock under one end of it to lift it to a level, making a convenient place beneath the floor for chickens and dogs.

It was a long quadrangular building, with five doors opening in its front. It looked like a barracks, or a bunkhouse, with all these exits ready to the necessity of men in a hurry, but it was devoted solely to the use of Jim's family, which comprised himself and his wife Jinny, a little Jim and a littler Jinny.

There was no doubt which was the main door among all the doors. It was easily picked out by the grease where little Jim and Jinny had pushed it, and the abrasions where their copper-toed shoes had kicked it, with numerous marks of dogs' claws between.

There was only the width of a township, six miles, between Jim's ranch and the Indian Territory line. The Indian country to the south of them was spoken of by everybody in that part of Kansas as the Nation, the possessions of the Cherokee Nation lying along there. The Cherokees leased a great deal of their land to Kansas cattlemen, among whom Jim Kelly was one.

Jim was a man of importance in the cattle industry, prosperous and shrewd, well on the way to independence. Jinny was figuring seriously on a house in McPacken.

A barbed wire fence enclosed Jim's house, his weak looking garden and such structures for the shelter of poultry and livestock as he possessed. These latter were inconsiderable, the cattleman's last thought being for the comfort or welfare of the beasts that served him, or from

which his profits were drawn. Altogether the premises had a temporary, homeless, cheerless, bare, uninviting appearance. Louise was surprised to find the place so bleak. She had expected better things of anybody belonging to Maud.

Jim was at home, on account of its being Sunday and company expected. He was at the gap in the wire fence, the cut strands unhooked to let them drive in, shaved to a rather raw look about the chin, which was several shades lighter than the upper part of his face. Louise concluded a considerable growth of whiskers had fallen to Jim's razor that day, a long-deferred sacrifice, doubtless due to pressure afield.

Jim was a tall flat man, with a large red mustache, having a gaunt look about the eyes such as seemed to be the Kelly brand. He was an affable and loquacious man, loud and familiar in his way.

Jinny came out, her little Kellys running before, looking rather Teutonic and robust, her long and abundant yellowish hair wound in a shining braid around her head. It was plain at a glance that she was quite content in her long flimsy house with many doors, just about the sort of woman one would expect to come out of it, indeed.

Jinny had a piano in her parlor, a wonder and delight in a land where pianos afterward became as common as toadstools. Jinny could not play it, but Jim could do enough for all the rest of the family and the neighborhood for sixty miles around, if volume of sound could be taken as a measure of his musical proficiency. His repertory was not large, yet it was sufficient for the needs and understanding of those who stopped to hear him slam his tunes off with such forceful pedaling that shook the house.

Maud was something better at the piano than Jim. Her selections covered a wider range, including the latest songs. She was obliged to play them all after supper for Jim and Jinny, and an ancient cowboy

with harsh white hair that stood erect, giving his countenance a constant expression of mild astonishment.

This old-timer sat with his chair reared back against the wall, his feet on the forward rungs, holding an unlit cigarette plastered to his under lip. He put out his tongue frequently and shifted it a little, working his mouth afterward as if tasting it. Louise grew nervous waiting for him to light it, which he did not do, although he held a match ready all the time. It was not delicacy that restrained him, she was certain, for Jim was smoking a cigar that brought recollections of Pap Cowgill.

The cowboy, or the cow grandfather, as Louise thought suited his years better, was greatly interested in the dance proposed by Maud for the next night. Jim consulted him gravely on the prospect of this one and that one being able to come, and whether so-and-so could be rounded up to fiddle, and somebody else, who must have been a notable person from their glowing enthusiasm in speaking of him, might be roped in to call off. Frank, the shock-haired veteran, believed he could reach this accomplished person by setting out at once, to which Jim agreed.

Louise was not surprised by the eagerness with which Jim and Jinny took up the arrangements for the dance. It was plain to see that any sort of diversion in their cattle-hedged existence was welcome, both of them young and full of healthful enjoyment in association with their kind. Jinny took stock of her canned oysters, to make sure whether there would be enough for soup, Jim standing ready to despatch one of his men to McPacken at once to replenish the supply.

Jim did not seem relieved nor greatly concerned when Jinny reported sufficient oysters for the occasion on hand. A little ride of sixty miles for a dollar's worth of cove oysters would have been only a trifling incident in Jim's daily habit of encompassing wide spaces, nothing at all to interfere with the success of a dance in his house, famous for its hospitality.

Maud said it would be her farewell to the range, and she was going to throw a leg over the moon. This pleased Frank so greatly that he struck his match as he stood in the door taking his leave, and lifted it to within a few inches of his cigarette, where he seemed to remember something, and blew it out. They heard him galloping away presently on his quest of the man whose calling off was so essential to the happiness of everybody.

"It's too bad Mr. Cook can't be here," said Louise.

"Mr. Cook?" said Jim, staring at her. "Who's Mr. Cook?"

"Maud's beau."

"Oh, Sam. I guess he'll have dancin' enough when he marries Maud—dancin'

around to make a livin'. He'd better take all the rest he can beforehand."

Chapter XVI

MISSING CATTLE

IT TURNED out that the man of accomplishment so indispensable to the gaiety of the occasion was a saturnine, dark-faced, sinewy hill-billy originally from the Ozarks of Missouri. He called off the figures of the dances through a small aperture in the corner of his twisted mouth, running the rest of the sound out of his nose.

This man was foreman on a ranch forty or fifty miles distant from Jim Kelly's. He had come at Frank's long-carried invitation, though what pleasure he got out of the dance himself was beyond Louise Gardner's speculative realm. Glum and ill-favored, he appeared to look on it all as a trifling piece of folly in which circumstances had forced him to play a part. He grinned a little at rare intervals, a sort of beginning and ending of a grin, with none of the full-spread humor, but as a caller he was eminent in the land. He danced but seldom, and then with Louise. He said he was acquainted with her; she had served him breakfast once at the hotel.

True to Maud's prediction, Tom Laylander arrived at the ranch toward evening. He came riding the outlaw's horse, with the long-carrying rifle that he had wrenched from the dead robber's hand as he lay before the bank door. He told Louise he had spent the afternoon looking over his cattle. They had filled out surprisingly, he said; many of the younger ones could be marketed in a pinch just as they stood.

Tom was not in the mood for dancing that night, he said. He jigged through a set with Jinny, discharging his obligation of respect; one with Maud, because she asked him to, and another with Louise, to keep her away from the ranch foreman who called off through his nose, and wore a black shirt without coat or vest, with a necktie as red as a flame. The rest of the time he stood around talking with Jim and his guests in his soft, drawling speech, so much in contrast with the loud, harsh, wide-open-mouthed delivery of the Kansas tongue. Jinny said he sounded as if he mashed the words in the roof of his mouth.

The two deputy sheriffs on guard over what once had been Tom Laylander's herd were there, going it strong on oyster soup, and something that was not soup, which Jim Kelly had in a jug behind the chicken house. They were taking compensation in a lump for their desolate days on the range.

Tom Laylander was the star of the occasion, in spite of his modest withdrawal from its activities in his attempt to eliminate himself from public notice. Jim wanted the story of Tom's ride in pursuit of the bank robbers; how he had picked them off with the dead bandit's rifle, until he had reduced their numbers, and then closed in; whether the last of them had put up much of a fight, and how Tom had managed to come through without a scratch. Jim drew the guests around him by his loud and insistent interrogation, which was not intended for anything but lively, admiring, friendly interest, no matter for its rudeness.

Tom tried to back out of it, as if they had cornered him with some shameful accusation, leveling the matter down with his expressive hands, smoothing it to a thing of utmost simplicity, so small and unworthy that it did not merit a word. He said it really amounted to nothing at all; that it was all over, anyhow, and they must excuse him from discussing it, or any phase of it, now.

Louise understood how hard it was for him, generous, modest, truly valiant as she knew him to be. She thought that if Jim Kelly, and some of the others who looked at Tom with their uncomprehending, bold stare of curiosity, could see as deeply into his heart as she had seen, they never would say again that he had come through that experience without a scratch.

Anyway, it was a triumph for Jim and Jinny to have a guest so notable on display before their guests. The men all came up and shook hands with Tom, and said they were proud to know him, which was sincere and true. They were outspoken in their denunciation of Cal Withers, almost to a man. If Tom had put his case before a jury of twelve cattlemen, they said, Cal Withers would have been looking around by now for somebody else to skin; he never would have got judgment on that note.

When they talked among themselves, however, they turned queer glances around at Tom, and spoke with voices lowered. He seemed to be such a simple kind of a feller, they said. Maybe he hadn't understood what a dangerous thing he was foolin' with when he took out after them bank robbers that way, hot-foot and alone. It was something like a baby hackin' at a

rattlesnake with a hatchet, they guessed; a lucky lick or two had saved him where a wiser man might have been killed.

That was about the size of it, judgin' from the looks of him, a young strawberry-complected feller like him. He didn't know what he was up to when he grabbed that rifle and rode off after them fellers. Luck had carried him through, but it was luck that darn few men ever enjoyed. The way he handed that note over in court proved he had a screw loose. No sensible man would have done a thing like that. It was well known that simple people could go through great perils and come out whole. That had happened so often in frontier experience that no man would dispute it. It was one of the mysterious laws of luck.

Frank, the dean of the range, was flinging a high heel that night. He was smoothed up for the event quite a bit, except his hair. That seemed to stand up straighter, as if alert for the pleasure of the dance. Frank fixed his favors on Maud, dancing at her with every opening.

At midnight the company began to thin out; an hour later there were only ladies enough for a set, counting the three in the house. They danced this farewell measure to Jim's playing, after which everybody took horse and galloped off as if a penalty for being abroad approached with the dawn.

The two deputy sheriffs were the last to go, owing to some difficulty they had getting on their horses. They had been the most devoted patrons of Jim's jug, which was not a cider jug as he solemnly protested to Jinny. Between the efforts of Jim and Laylander, they were hoisted up and set on their way.

"I guess if their horses don't take 'em to camp they'll go to McPacken," Jim said.

"Maybe I'd better go with 'em and see they don't wander off," Tom suggested.

"No, let 'em go. Nothing's goin' to hurt 'em."

Tom was for setting out for McPacken himself, but Jim and Jinny would not hear of it. Maud said she would be offended forever unless he remained over a day or two. Louise could not add her word, but she did all that a girl could do with her eyes, and Tom yielded, without any great expenditure of persuasion. Jim opened one of the five doors and told him to make himself at home.

The household was astir early next morning, even to little Jinny and Jim, for a little indulgence will not break a habit that necessity has fixed upon a man. Tom was out with the first gleam of sun, feeling more at home than he had since coming to Kansas. It was like old times to see the sun come up that way at the level edge of the world.

Maud and Louise were a little late coming to breakfast, at which they finally appeared in riding habits, looking as fresh as buttermilk, Jim said.

"Where do you intend to go straddlin' off to this morning?" he inquired. "Them town ridin' bloomers of yours're liable to scare all the cows on the range."

"You'll have to take the chance, then," said Maud, with her wide-spreading grin. "I'm going over to the Nation with Louise to show her some squaws and squawks."

"Great sight," said Jinny contemptuously.

"We'll have Tom along. He's a cowman, he can head off any stampede we start," Maud explained.

"You'll go, won't you Tom?" Louise appealed.

"I'd just love to," Tom replied.

"Somebody a ridin' up," Jinny announced. She leaned to look out of the open door, a platter of ham and eggs raised high to balance her.

"It's them two deputy sheriffs," said Jim, curious speculation in his voice. "Wonder what they're back here after?"

"More cider," said Jinny scornfully.

"Hello, boys!" Jim hailed from the door, too much interested in breakfast to go very far away from it. "Light and look at your saddles. Come on in and get some breakfast."

Jinny had anticipated this shouted invitation. She was at the cupboard after more plates and cups, and Maud, knowing the rule of hospitality in that country, was closing up little Jim and Jinny, making room for the visitors at the end of the table. Louise heard the crunch on the gravel path leading from gate to door.

"Say, Jim, you ain't seen them darn cows of ours around here this morning, have you?" one of the deputies inquired, considerably troubled.

"No. What's the matter of 'em?"

"Gone," another voice replied. "We left 'em there, all bunked down when we come over here last night. There wasn't

a hide or hair of 'em in sight when we got up this morning."

"Have you looked around over there?" Jim asked.

"Sure we have. They're gone as clean as if the wind had blowed 'em away."

Louise looked at Tom, who turned toward the door, listening to what was being reported. She wondered what new trouble was coming now. Tom excused himself and went to the door.

"I guess they're around somewhere, they couldn't go very far in that time," Jim said, more amused than concerned. He held the screen door open. "Come in and get some breakfast, then me and Tom we'll ride over with you and see if we can't find 'em."

"We'd sure be obliged to you if you would," said the livery stable cowboy, his foot in the door. "What us fellers don't know about cows'd surprise you."

"And that ain't no lie," the other one seconded. He came in after his companion, both of them grinning at the girls and giving everybody greeting.

"No use to worry," Jinny assured them; "they're right around there some place. Cattle don't stampede off this kind of weather very often."

"Well, it does happen sometimes," Jim seemed to soliloquize, engaged again with his ham and eggs. "They might 'a' got a scare at something and bucked off, but they wouldn't go far."

"We'll be in one hell of a fix," said the livery stable cowboy, hitting on a polite exposition of their situation and pronouncing it with desperate earnestness, "if we can't find them cows in time for the sale. What do you suppose they'll do to us, Jim?"

"Send us up for about forty-nine years!" said the other cowboy, gloomily.

"We'll find 'em, all right," Jim declared.

The two deputies appeared to be quite sober, although they had no craving for ham and eggs. They drank coffee from their saucers, sitting uneasily, ready to jump and go.

"What did that nigger cook say happened to the herd?" Tom inquired.

"He didn't know nothing about it till he looked out of his wagon this morning," the clerk cowboy replied. "We made a mistake leavin' them darn cattle alone last night."

"It sure looks like it," Tom agreed.

"We'll get about fifty-five years apiece if we don't find 'em in time for the sale."

Maud began to talk then, and Jinny, seeing what a scare the two young men had had thrown into them. Louise kept her peace, not being a cow authority. But she was passing through a curious fluctuation of hope and dread; a glow as of some undefined joy rising in her one moment, sinking away to the cold depression of despair the next. What had become of the cattle? Who had driven them off? Who was there to gain anything by their removal from the sheriff's custody but Tom? And Tom would no more have thought of doing it than he would have thought of robbing Jim Kelly of the horses in his corral.

"They're right around there in a holler somewhere," said Jim. "You boys overlooked 'em, easy enough to do unless you're used to cattle. Five or six hundred head's nothing but a speck on the range, 'specially when they bunch up and lay down somewhere in a holler."

Tom was silent. If he had any theories he kept them to himself, as Louise expected of him. But she looked at him appealingly, as if asking him to say something that would assure and quiet her uneasy perplexity. He only shook his head.

"Let's go with them, Louise," Maud proposed, all animation for the adventure. "I want to see the hole that swallowed five hundred head of cattle."

(*Part III in the next issue of* SHORT STORIES)

In Our Next Number

White Water Men

By

J. Allan Dunn

MUREL'S MEN

By

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

ALONG the Mississippi in the early eighteen-thirties was an organization of criminals which, by contrast, relegates the James' Boys, the Daltons and Youngers almost to the status of small boys raiding a fruit-stand. Though much of the history of Murel's Gang has been lost in the haze of time, it is known that Murel was a desperately cool, hardy, conscienceless rascal, with intelligence of high order. It is said that he played his favorite rôle of itinerant preacher like a born actor.

Murel's henchmen—known only to the leaders—were scattered up and down both banks of the river, with a favorite rendezvous among the swamps and cane-brakes of the wild Arkansas shore. The band had two classes. The "Heads" or "General Council," numbering about four hundred, planned all activities, but seldom took part in their execution. The active agents were called "Strikers" and numbered about seven hundred. These last were the Council's tools; their share in the loot was small, but all dangers fell to their lot.

Stealing negroes and horses was the gang's specialty, but an industrious gangster could always enliven this program by murder, highway robbery, burglary, arson, and the like. Horses were stolen in large numbers for sale in other states. Murel is reported to have often ascended the pulpit in his clerical disguise and held a congregation breathless with his eloquence—while outside his agents were making sure that all who had ridden to church would walk home.

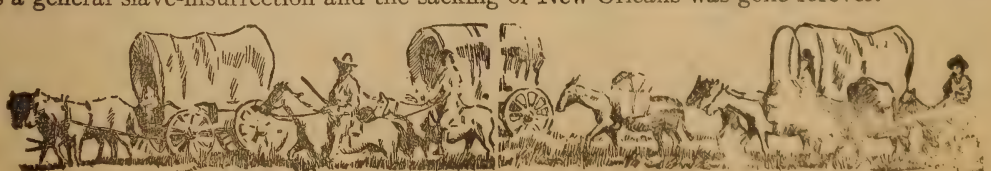
But negro-stealing was their joy! They would tell a slave that if he would run away from his master and let the gang sell him, he would be given part of the purchase-price. Then he was to run away a second time and the gang would help him to a free state. In the hope of attaining freedom and a sum of money, many negroes agreed to this arrangement. In some cases they were sold three and four times. But about the time when three or four thousand dollars had been realized, it was considered too dangerous to market a slave again—he might be recognized by a former "owner." Since the slave was the principal witness against the gang, he was finally knocked on the head and dumped into the Mississippi. From Murel's confession—still extant—one may believe that these murders were most callously done.

Many attempts were made to cope with the criminals, but so clever was Murel and his organization so powerful that it seemed likely he might trudge industriously up and down until he died of old age. But one day a young man named Stewart, on the track of two slaves stolen by the gang, fell in with Murel and won the chief's favor to such extent that, after taking the oath, Stewart was admitted to the General Council. Murel told Stewart much—his plans for a vast slave-insurrection in which all planters would be massacred and New Orleans taken and looted; details of his many crimes.

When he found opportunity, Stewart went to the authorities with details of the gang's organization and plans, including full lists of membership.

At the trial it was found that the gang's tentacles penetrated all strata of society; so powerfully placed were many hitherto unsuspected members that conviction of the criminals was very difficult. All sorts of pressure were brought to bear upon the prosecution; Stewart was vilified as a perjurer—called traitor for violating his oath. So many attempts were made upon his life that finally he fled from the South.

Murel, for all the myriad cold-blooded murders due directly or indirectly to his grim purposes, got off with fourteen years imprisonment. However, the gang was broken up and even if members escaped to commit later crimes, the great organization that hatched such schemes as a general slave-insurrection and the sacking of New Orleans was gone forever.



BLACK CATS AND SATAN

By KARL W. DETZER

Author of "The Other Captain Steel," "A Pinch of Powder," etc.

LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE SUPERSTITIOUS ABOUT BLACK CATS, BUT A FIRE DEPARTMENT IS NO PLACE TO HARBOR SUPERSTITIONS. STILL, THEY FREQUENTLY DO HARBOR HEROES

CAPTAIN AHEARN, fat, untidy and thin-haired, sat by the alarm stand in the quarters of fire Engine Company 43 and listened nervously to the remarks of the "joker." The telegraph key had worked like a lascar slave that morning. The thermometer stuck at eighty. Captain Ahearn felt the heat; a sign that age was stealing up behind him.

On the bench outside of the open double doors, Plug O'Neil, Raklios, McGurty and Todd were reading the noon editions. The big crimson motor pumper shone with their recent rubbing in the center of the apparatus room floor. The small-chested, wheezy car of Battalion Chief Gus Horty sat at an angle to the south of the mammoth engine. Horty slept on his bunk under the tin roof.

The joker had been silent a moment. Suddenly it spit out a message, three quick fives, a wait, then three, then two, then nine. It was a call for Ladder Truck Nineteen, a still alarm. Should the truck go south, automatically Engine 43 must follow it. Captain Ahearn leaned forward, elbows on the polished oak of the joker stand, telephone receiver to his ear.

The four firemen had dropped their newspapers, and, having run on their toes to prevent any sound blurring the alarm location given by headquarters, stood ready beside the engine. Battalion Chief Horty, who had heard the call as he tried to sleep, slid the brass pole from the second floor, landing softly on his rubber soles.

Captain Ahearn listened.

"Woolworth Avenue and Brent Street," he heard the slow, keen enunciation of the alarm headquarters operator. "Brent Street and Woolworth Avenue."

Ahearn dropped the receiver back upon its hook.

"It's a go!" he announced shortly, and his finger jammed down on the rubber key.

Five—five—five—four—three!

The signal that Engine 43 was on its way sputtered across the wire. Captain Ahearn swung up beside Raklios, the driver. Chief Horty, who must go in his own car, gaped, craned his head and ran forward.

"Where's Ben?" he demanded. "Ben! Ben, you devil!"

His own driver, asleep in the sun at the rear of the quarters, heard nothing.

"You, Plug!" the chief howled. "Get off there and ride me!"

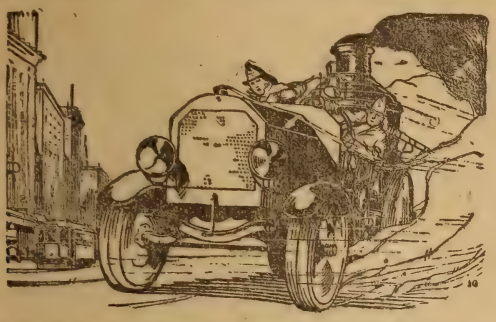
Plug O'Neil dropped off the rear step of the engine as it thundered out of the house. He ran back to the small car of the chief—the buggy it is called out of respect for old days—twisted the crank and slid in behind the wheel.

"Woolworth and Brent," Horty directed.

The car jerked forward. O'Neil didn't mind an opportunity to drive the battalion

chief. It put him on the map with that individual, a chance he needed. Success in the fire department was very necessary for success in a private matrimonial venture just now. He had been called a floater; by no less a person than the father of the girl he wanted to marry.

The chief's red buggy bumped over the fire house sill and swung into the track of the engine. The pumper was a block and



a half up the street already. O'Neil pushed speed into the light car. It should scoot past the heavier machine in the next block; the shortest route lay straight ahead.

He rattled over the car track at the corner. Half way across he stiffened in his seat and jammed tight a brake. He released it, backed, jangled the bell, and swung sharply to the right.

Horty screamed. "Follow 'em, man!" he ordered. "Here! Here! Where you goin'?"

"Pick them up—couple blocks over," O'Neil answered between breaths.

"Turn around and follow, I tells you!" roared Horty.

Plug O'Neil willingly, with his jaw set, disobeyed orders and kept going. Battalion Chief Gus Horty, his wrath choking his speech, glared at his substitute driver and then gave his attention to the bell. A traffic jam impeded the car at Sheridan Road. Thirty valuable seconds slipped by. Two minutes later it arrived at the scene of a small, unimportant fire which the members of Squad Ten had put out with hand pumps.

Ben, the driver, coming up behind on a commandeered automobile, reported breathlessly to his superior.

"Where you been?" Horty demanded, scowling under his black eyebrows.

"Was asleep, sir. You got away ten foot ahead of me."

"Take the car. Send O'Neil to me."

"Go back to quarters!" the battalion chief ordered when Plug appeared, a gaunt, red, abashed young creature with his hands hanging too far out of his blue service shirt. "Go back to quarters and wait for me!"

Plug rode home with his company.

"It was like this, sir," he explained, standing before the battalion chief in the upper room thirty minutes later. "You didn't see it. It crossed the street right back of the engine."

"What crossed?"

"A cat, sir!"

"A what?"

"Black cat."

Horty put on his steel rimmed glasses and stared. He couldn't believe a fireman would talk that way.

"You say you was 'fraid of a cat?" he asked unbelievingly.

"A black cat," Plug corrected him.

"A cat! You disobeyed orders. What's a cat got to do with orders? Want to be suspended because of a cat? Want me bringing charges agin' you?"

"I ain't lettin' a black cat cross my path, sir," O'Neil explained, "charges or no charges. We'd never have got there if we'd gone on that way; turned over surer than——"

"Rats!" broke in the chief. He looked incredulously. "Lord, you're dumb! A fireman and that rot! You ought to be a cop!"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't 'yes, sir' me! You're fired, ever I hear of you disobeying again. No matter if there's fifty black cats, you're fired! Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get out!" ordered the chief. "Go back to duty this time, and never again!"

"Thanks, sir!"

Pipeman O'Neil was ill pleased with prospects. He knew well enough that he was a marked man. Battalion Chief Horty had a reputation up and down the department as an officer who never forgot. He rarely brought charges against a man, seldom suspended or dismissed the members of his battalion; but once he picked a fireman for discipline, that man, sooner or later, resigned in self defense.

ON THE second day after the affair of the black cat, O'Neil stood upon the carpet in the upper room.

"Are ye a tramp or a fireman?" Horty demanded.

O'Neil swallowed and eyed his own, not-immaculate front.

"A fireman, sir."

"No you ain't; you're a tramp. A dirty hobo! Patches and grease spots and rags.

You got to clean up. Own another uniform?"

"My dress blues, yes."

"Then wear 'em!"

O'Neil wore them the next night, which was his off duty. He had expected trouble from the black cat, but not so much, nor the kind, that greeted him. It met him at the door, when he rapped for Miss Jennie Sullivan.

A round ball rubbed against his legs.

"Isn't he cute?" Jennie Sullivan demanded.

Plug O'Neil drew back. "He's black, Jennie," he protested.

"Black as Satan," the girl agreed. "I found him in the alley. I thought he wouldn't live at first. You'll pull through now, won't you?" She picked the kitten up.

"Wish he was gray or white, Jennie," Plug admitted. "I always had bad luck with black cats." He touched it gingerly. "If he wasn't all over black!"

"You're superstitious as a policeman!" Jennie chuckled. "You don't believe that sort of thing?"

"No-o, I don't believe it. Still, I don't like to prove it myself!"

The cat grew alarmingly. Each visit found him taller, longer, fatter. Jennie Sullivan conspired with the milk trust, and Satan extended himself into a sleek, self-sufficient animal with an endless appetite. Plug watched him grow and wondered. He waited for trouble every morning at the engine house. It came every day, in ways he never suspected. He had been warned three times. Once he had reported for duty fifteen seconds late. Another time he had left a clot of mud under the spring in his corner of the engine.

So he hunted a job.

"I'm thinking of leaving the department," he told Jennie Sullivan that night. "I'm done with it. Can't get along with the Battalion Chief."

Miss Sullivan looked displeased; then worried. She quoted her father, who had used the word "floater."

"You know you do float, Plug," she concluded. "You went on a ladder truck and stayed two months. Then you got transferred to an engine. How long ago was that?"

"Last March," O'Neil admitted.

"Four months. And before that you painted."

"A year I did that. I'd rather be a farmer, Jennie——"

"Next spring," Jennie insisted. "Father won't give us an inch of land till next spring."

The black kitten rubbed Pipeman O'Neil's ankle with an arched back. Plug O'Neil looked down at it, unfriendly. He knew what caused his luck. He had escaped one cat, and this other came to sit at his feet. He thought wearily of Horty and the morning.

"Dad's particular," Miss Sullivan was insisting. "He says you never had a chance to show what you're made of. Stay on 43, and some time when you're on a big job, Dad will see you."

"There can't be no really big job, Jennie, out here. Now when I was on that ladder truck in the stockyards——"

"Just stick then," Jennie concluded. "He's got an idea you're not going to."

Plug O'Neil secretly had the same idea. He did not express it to Miss Sullivan, nor yet to her parents. He bore the misfortune of his chief's dislike without audible grumbling. He tried hard to hold the job.

Once he interviewed Sullivan senior, and was dismayed at his own inability in argument.

"You can't marry her; no, sir, not yet. How do I know you'll make good on that farm up there in Michigan? Good farmers have failed, how can I trust a fireman to it?"

"We'll pay good rent."

"I've heard others say that."

He came out second best, did Plug O'Neil, and slept uneasily until the alarm clock rang and he returned to the quarters of Engine 43. It was a dull, dusty, hot day. The joker was busy with small talk of still alarms. Dry roofs in crowded quarters kept downtown companies forever on the move.

A 4-11 alarm on the west side in the afternoon cleared out a square mile of apparatus and served to hold the interest of Engine 43 for an hour. Then came night, and more heat with it. The members of the company sat on the bench outside the front door. Battalion Chief Gus Horty made his evening inspection of companies early, and, stripping his white, collarless shirt, carried a chair to the alley, where he hoped to find a breeze.

The first alarm came at nine o'clock.

Engine 99 and Truck 6 had answered a call to Highland Avenue and Summit

Street. Captain Ahearn, sitting on duty by the joker stand, had chalked that information upon the board. They were out a long time, those companies. A still alarm usually finds the department back in quarters in less than ten minutes. Twenty passed, and the joker still kept silent concerning Engine 99 and Truck 6.

Miss Jennie Sullivan, her father and mother, walking toward the drive where they hoped for a breeze, passed the open doors of the engine house. Plug O'Neil, stretching on the bench, hailed them and ran down the driveway to speak. They passed on after a moment, to Plug's relief. He knew the jokes of his mates.

Returning inside, he examined the "running board." Engine 99 still was out. The joker started to report. It broke off in the middle of a dot, and the glass-cased instrument that records box alarms began to unwind its tape jerkily.

"Eight eight one!" Captain Ahearn counted the punches on the paper ribbon. "That's Summit and Highland!"

"Must of got away from Ninety-nine!" Chief Gus Horty said as he came up from behind. "You go on 4-11?"

"Nope, it's out of our district."

"I think I got to go in there." The chief thumbed a small, greasy notebook. "Yep, I go there on a 4-11."

Raklios slumped off the bench in front of the quarters and stood in the middle of the floor, watching the captain chalk up the unilluminated story of this new alarm upon the blackboard.

"9:21 P. M.," he wrote. "Box 881. After still to Engine 99."

The alarm instrument bustled into activity. The small punch holes spilled down the tape. Captain Ahearn, ribbon in hand, counted them as they came out.

Eight punches, eight more, then one. A pause. Then a two and eleven all in a row. Eight more punches, eight and one.

A second alarm had come in from Highland and Summit Streets. That left a broad, open territory to the west. Eight engine companies and three ladder trucks had been whipped out of two square miles of residential territory, where engine houses are scarce and far between.

The third alarm snapped over three minutes later.

"What in the name of the saints can it be?" Captain Ahearn demanded. "There sure ain't much out that way to burn. Apartments mostly, and over there to the south that paint factory. They wouldn't go pulling that box for the paint works!"

As if giving the lie to his words, the room was shaken with a deep humming sound. Windows rattled, and far across town a thick boom rolled ominously.

"The paint works all right!"

Horty's red buggy raced down the drive, with a clattering bell and a trailing cloud of dust. A sharp breath of wind puffed into the door. The ticker tape on the alarm stand lashed back and forth.

"Wind coming up!" said Captain Ahearn.

Raklios walked to the engine and slid his rubber jacket off the front wheel. He pushed his arms into it. O'Neil looked across the box at the hose, neatly plaited into position. His helmet was there. He lounged back to the alarm stand. Squatting on the floor, McGurty and Todd tried to ease their nervousness with a game of dice, without stakes and therefore uninteresting. Captain Ahearn still wrote laboriously on the blackboard the list of companies that had answered the 4-11 alarm.

The joker hummed into action. Instinctively, their nerves tight, the men jumped forward.

"They're changin' quarters," Ahearn remarked, tipping his head to listen. "Maybe we'll move."

Fire alarm headquarters, that big, sound-deadened room downtown, was methodically shifting engine and ladder companies. Three square miles of the city lay unguarded up to the north. All apparatus was near Summit and Highland Streets, or on its way there. The quarters of fifteen companies stood open upon blank interiors. To fill these gaps in the city's wall of fire protection is the work of unexcited operators, at alarm headquarters.

But before they were well on their task a bell started tinkling. The third assistant marshal, just arrived on the scene, was putting across his first special call. Ten more engines, he demanded; the telegraph instrument tapped off the message casually.

"It's blowing up a gale, I tell you!" Ahearn growled.

"Shall I shut the doors?" Todd asked. Todd was a recruit.

"No, never mind. That's the surest way of having to open them again!"

The wind played boisterously about the

wide entry. Captain Ahearn pulled on his rubber jacket. Plug O'Neil, hands in his breeches' pockets, his thin neck thrust forward, walked noiselessly out to the driveway.

"Hi, fellows!" he shouted back. "See it from here!"

Todd and McGurty followed out into the night. The wind slashed down upon their backs. Far to the northwest a broad pink patch of sky wavered with dangerous lights. Plug O'Neil lighted a cigarette and watched nervously. The family of Sullivan lived two blocks from Highland and Summit Streets.

"She's sure eating something!" broke in McGurty. "Looks like more'n a paint factory to me!"

The alarm telegraph ripped out a command. Ten short taps, close together, sputtered out of the brassy throat of the instrument.

"Special call!" Ahearn shouted, and started toward the engine. Halfway across the floor he swung back to the alarm stand. Raklios jerked on his gauntlets. Todd, running back along the left side of the car, bumped into him. The telegraph was spitting out numbers.

Engine 118, Engine 23, Engine 74, Truck 5, Engine 146—then a pause. O'Neil stamped his foot on the floor. Once more the numbers began.

Engine 43.

"Go!" howled Captain Ahearn. "Go like the devil!"

Raklios spun the crank and the engine roared. Altogether the members of the company leaped aboard. Ahearn yanked the bell rope and the wind carried a warning echo up the deserted street. Todd climbed atop the hose, his thin hair plastered back upon his head, his legs wrapped about the short roof ladder tilted above the wagon box.

On the rear step McGurty and O'Neil swung their elbows around the grip rod. O'Neil reached his helmet from the top of the hose and clamped it on his head. He buttoned his rubber jerkin close to his neck and slipped on his gloves. He was ready.

Engine 43 thrashed across the night, careening left and right, charging against a determined wind. The bell awakened sleeping cross streets. The engine sputtered.

North. West. North.

Clark Street was alight. A fruitstand proprietor, cutting bananas from a stalk, paused, turning slowly to watch the tumult swish by. A frantic motorman jammed his brakes tight, and a street car

stopped just in time. A policeman ran into the street, commandeering an automobile. Hanging to the running board he urged speed. The usual trail of curious followed in the wake of Engine 43.

At Diversey Parkway, Captain Ahearn jangled the bell rope double time. Driver Raklios spread out his elbows at the wheel and the great car swung in a wide, sure circle, slowing down to a sane pace; then, once turned west, leaped forward again. The sky was purple overhead. Half way down to the horizon it glared pink. Just over the house tops orange and yellow lights flared ominously.

O'Neil looked up.

"See 'em?" he demanded.

"Boards?" McGurty stared aloft.

The sky was shaking with sparks, burning, wind-whipped timbers, embers.

"Another mile," O'Neil put in, and gripped the hand rail tighter.

He squinted his eyes and swung his head around the side of the car. That fire extended over a wide territory! No one or two building job there! The wind blurred his vision and then he looked once more, intently. The fire was running south.

Jennie Sullivan lived south. Luck! That black cat! He scowled at the thought of the purring black ball of velvet in the Sullivan apartment, that went by the name of Satan, and rubbed his trouser leg on slightest opportunity. Jennie would believe him next time when he told her cats could bring such things as fire!

The big engine thumped across a pair of projecting car tracks, jarring the teeth in his head. Then the speed slackened. The sidewalks were full of people. Crazy motorists already were jamming the highway. A police patrol slid past darkly, with its small bell talking. Porch lights flashed on. Upper windows in small apartment houses stood open, and flat dwellers hung out precariously.

Plug O'Neil shot forward against the hand grip and the breath pushed out of him; the brakes had been thrown on. Captain Ahearn was shouting.

"Stand by that plug!" O'Neil heard. "Get ready to lead out!"

The air was hot, that dry, chalky heat which rises from great fires. Throb of motors made the pavement shake. The fire was close ahead, spreading like a plague from the paint factory. Captain Ahearn had chosen wisely, getting into the shelter of this building. But what building?

Plug O'Neil stopped with the end of the heavy suction pipe in his hands. He stared at the front of the three story building that shielded him from the fire. A man was running down the front steps, with a chair under his arm. A woman hurried into the door. Plug O'Neil growled and swung over the suction. Why did people clutter up the street with furniture before their houses caught fire?

"Take this hydrant!" Captain Ahearn was shouting. "Lead off!"

The suction screwed into place. Raklios, a spanner in his hands, was twisting the brass coupling into position. The brass nozzle shone upon Todd's shoulder. Hose whipped off the tailboard.

"Twist it in!" O'Neil directed. He clamped the brass hose coupling between his knees. His face dripped with sweat that minute. He had looked up, seen the numbers on the apartment building in front of him, and wondered fiercely why they looked familiar.

"Jennie Sullivan lives there!" he burst out to Pipeman Todd.

"You're off your nut." Todd swore and swung the nozzle into place.

"Lead off!" Ahearn repeated. "Down this alley!"

Plug O'Neil looked anxiously at the second floor above him. The Sullivans were not at home. This place would not burn—heads down, collars up, Ahearn in the lead, O'Neil at his heels and the other pair trailing off behind, the members of Engine 43 charged the fire. A whole block of old apartments was blazing just across the alley from the building where Jennie Sullivan lived. Beyond, the hot ashes of a block of smaller dwellings kicked up sparks and embers. Farther away the paint factory, still booming with explosions, burned yellow and green and blue, as fresh oils and varnishes trickled into the flame.

Battalion Chief Gus Horty ran past, shouting. No one gave him heed. He swung back.

"You, 43, right in there! Hold it! See? Hold it!"

"Up a little," Captain Ahearn urged, then himself fell back.

Yellow water spurted out of the nozzle. It lifted in a rising arc, and splashed against the hot walls of the apartment back of the Sullivans. Plug O'Neil went down to his knees and gripped the nozzle tight.

"After it, men!" Ahearn was crying. "Don't let it cross the alley. We got to hold it!"

Laughing flames leaped out of a hole in the roof. A dozen windows on the top floor reddened. Glass fell out. The heat smothered down upon four panting, rubber-coated specks around a brass nozzle on the ground.

"One at a time," Ahearn was saying, "one at a time. Hit them windows, drown it out—like that. See, it's dark. Now the next."

Two lower windows flared with light. More glass rained down. The fire jumped higher out of the roof. A rickety fence kindled, not twenty feet away, and a garage roof crinkled up and began to burn with an oily sputter.

"Hit the garage!" Ahearn demanded.

The nozzle tip slid downward and water splashed across the roof. For a moment the fire subsided in that quarter. Then a beam crashed through the upper floor of the old apartment building.

Wind puffed out of the windows. Fire washed up the walls. Heat dropped to the ground like oil about the pipemen and their captain.

"Back up, boys," Ahearn ordered.

They slid back two feet, five, ten.

"A little more, can't stand it," grumbled the fat officer.

A section of roof slid in; the wall bulged out. Somewhere behind him O'Neil heard the shouts of other engine companies, charging forward with new nozzles.

"Run!"

Captain Ahearn dropped the hose. The nozzle kicked out of Plug's blistered hands. It twisted, whipped, thrashed. Todd, dizzy witth heat, whirled around twice, staggered back, then plunged blindly toward the fire. The careening brass tip spun upward with the force of charging water, slashed in a circle, and jabbed down at the recruit. It caught

him square in the chest, spilling him sharply to the ground.

Plug O'Neil opened his mouth in a great shout, and felt the heat biting at his tongue.

"Shut 'er off!" he screamed. "Off! Off!"

The heavy nozzle subsided, and spun lazily across the baked earth, its stream slackening. O'Neil glanced up. The wall was falling. It seemed to hover just over his head.

"Saints above!" he muttered, and bent down. His right arm found Todd's limp body, curled around it, lifted the weight against his side. He ducked back, grasping his burden awkwardly. A great roar swelled out of the fire. Bricks and masonry charged past him. The wall had fallen. He still lived.

"Up that building, you!" the voice of Battalion Chief Gus Horty was demanding, somewhere in the turmoil. "Second floor, Engine 43, second floor! Pick up your line—stairway—back windows——"

Plug dropped Todd in the protection of a brick wall. A group of running men charged past him, a nozzle sticking out bravely in front of them. He tripped on their flapping hose. Where was his own line? His own nozzle? Captain Ahearn?

"Hi, Cap!" he heard himself shouting. "McGurty, you devil! Todd! Where's me line?"

What was that, there on the ground? He bent over. A man lay very still, one blistered hand across his face.

"Cap!" O'Neil demanded, "Up with you! Captain, O'Neil—sir—up!"

A policeman pushed him back.

"Here's another one!" the bluecoat shouted. O'Neil, standing loose-kneed, saw his commander carried away. He watched two other men working with Todd. McGurty was gone.

"Second floor," he muttered, then louder. "Second floor? Say that's *her* place!"

The black hose of Engine 43, its pressure gone, circled flabbily upon the muddy ground. O'Neil reached down for it. It was heavy. He pulled. Where was the nozzle? If only the buzzing in his head would stop! Who was this now?

"A cop, eh?" O'Neil spoke to the officer with a thick, smoky tongue. "Give me a hand, cop!"

The two men tugged, jerked, swore, struggled. They pulled the nozzle around in front. There was less heat there. New battalions of pipemen were entrenching themselves on the ground.

"Here's the door—boss says second floor—got to make it," Plug told the policeman.

"I got to stay outside," he heard in reply. "Can't go in."

"Just like a cop!"

Plug O'Neil, his lungs cooled, measured the step. He swung the nozzle over his shoulder. Two civilians, venturesome fellows, hiding in the protection of the porch, eased the hose around the corner.

"I'm goin' in," said Plug O'Neil. In he went.

The stairway was dark; all wires had snapped off. Open windows had let in smoke from the neighborhood, in quantities that whipped O'Neil's face as if the building burned itself. Smoke and heat, heat and smoke, one step, two steps, three steps; he was climbing. Smoke, more of it; five steps, six steps. Through an eternity he dragged the line.

Plug now groped through the smoky familiar upper hall. He smashed forward with the nozzle as a battering ram. It split the door panel. Plenty of line now—good! The civilian had cut and run. But lots of hose. From an open front window he howled.

"Charge it—43!"

Officials in the street took up the cry. There was a rush of air at the nozzle tip. O'Neil staggered back to the Sullivan apartment.

He swung into the kitchen at the rear. Its windows still held. Outside the glare of fire across the alley sent startled red lights into the room. Plug glanced at the floor, with his scorched, dim eyes.

A scurrying, black shape leaped in front of him.

He halted; the marrow must have melted out of his bones. That blasted black cat! His feet wavered. There was the window—why should a cursed cat separate him from it?

A glass pane cracked. It dropped in, and a wave of heat swept after it. Satan, scared at the sounds and sights of fire, sprang back again.

"Satan, you divil!" roared Plug O'Neil. "Run twic't in front of me, will you? Well, you ain't nothin'!"

He leaped forward. The nozzle jammed through the broken pane. Fire danced all about the rear of the building, sliding along

the handrails, dancing on the light, wooden porches. Across the alley another wall crunched in and sparks whipped higher.

Alone in the kitchen Plug O'Neil set to work. He paid no attention when a second pane dropped in. For the first time he missed his helmet. It must have slid off down there in the yard. His hair, curling about his temples, seemed to bristle with the heat.

He boosted up the nozzle. The shut gate held back the water, but air still leaked out. The hose was round, tight, unyielding, now. Plug O'Neil held the heavy brass against his chest, both arms around it. His tired feet found the gas range, and twisted about its sides. That would brace him.

"Let's go!" he whispered to himself, and the stream shot out. The nozzle thrummed. White water spit out of its tip, splashed against the flames, writhing up and down the porch stair. It soaked the blackened floor of the balcony. Water sprayed the roof and drummed on charred timbers.

It took ten minutes to drench the Sullivan building. Then the column shot into the open, square at the heart of the flames along the alley. Somewhere a crowd was cheering. Plug O'Neil was too busy to hear it. He did not see a black shadow when it streaked across the floor behind him. Satan meowed and slapped his tail against Plug's rubber coat. Plug opened his smarting eyes.

"You!" he growled. "You it was started it all!"

A piece of brick wall, standing like a pillar in the burning ruin across the way, swung out and crashed hotly into the alley. Plug tipped down the nozzle and beat it with the heavy stream. His arms ached from the weight of it. One hand seemed ready to break. His eyes were popping.

Satan jumped to his knee and burrowed its soft body against his chin. O'Neil's nose slid down to the soft fur. He breathed more easily.

"Hold where you're at!" he ordered.

The kitten purred and eased closer. Drops of water, leaking from the mouthpiece, sprayed across his back and wet Plug's nose. He played his brass tip left and right, left and right. He could see other lines of hose, once driven back, approaching again. From the hot, windy roof of the three story apartment, laddermen were driving a wedge into the fire. The battle seemed to slacken; the flames drew back. Plug O'Neil stuck to the firing line, dizzy, his wits ajump, his head flung forward.

"Here they are!" The first assistant marshal climbed into the room, his flashlight playing on the wet, muddy hose.

"Saints forgive, man, look!" he cried.

Battalion Chief Gus Horty swung in after him.

"You!" Horty shouted. "Plug, my man, listen!"

Pipeman O'Neil was beyond listening. He washed his hose stream back and forth. His eyes were shut. He was breathing jerkily through the filtering fur of Satan.

"A black cat!" exclaimed the Battalion Chief. "The man's off his wits."

"He may be, but it was him as stopped it." The assistant marshal lifted him up. "A cop said it was one man come up here alone. I didn't believe it. I'll take the line a while. Go get a ambulance."

Pa Sullivan entered the kitchen at that moment. An hour later Jennie and her mother were permitted through the police lines.

"I wouldn't leave them call an ambulance," Sullivan explained. "I put him in the spare room, him and that cat! I told the chief it was all right, said he was kind of a member of the family, sort of a son-in-law."

"Father!" exclaimed Jennie Sullivan.

"He's wantin' to see you," her father replied indifferently.

Plug O'Neil was bandaged and smelled sickeningly of oils and herbs.

"Guess I can turn him over to you, miss," said the ambulance surgeon. "You can take care of him?"

"Oh, I think so," answered Jennie Sullivan.

O'Neil spoke, in a raw, hoarse voice.

"I messed up the green carpet——"

"What's a green carpet?" interrupted Mrs. Sullivan.

"Satan here, he's a good little cat," O'Neil insisted. "We was here alone, him and me, and working like the devil, if you'll pardon, ma'am, like the devil!"

"Pa!" Jennie Sullivan put in. "What you doing?"

"Oh, nothing much," replied Sullivan senior, wiping off the neck of a very old looking bottle. "Say, Plug, seein's as you're kind of a member of the family, how'd you like a little——"

Satan crawled out of the sheets and stared, lashing his tail.

"Fine, sir," answered Plug O'Neil. "Thanks."

THE QUILTED JACKET

By BEN F. BAKER

Author of "The Blue Parka Man," etc.

HELD UP BY A HUMAN CITY RAT IN THE SONORA DESERT, MARICOPA STEVE WANTED FIRST TO TEACH HAM GREASE HOW TO ENTER A CAMP RIGHT, AND, SECOND, TO LEARN WHY HAM GREASE'S CHINESE JACKET WAS SO VALUABLE. HAM GREASE HIMSELF WAS TO LEARN SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN EITHER OF THESE THINGS

THE "broke-ear" burro cautiously stretched her ewe neck to the last possible inch and deftly peeled a flapjack from the little pile on the flat stone.

"Maricopa" Steve, squatting on his heels across the tiny fire of mesquite, carefully returned the cup of batter to its appointed place on the extreme edge of the caked and smelly saddle-blanket that served as his table, and turned just as the outer rim of the looted flapjack vanished in the burro's velvety muzzle.

Maricopa's habitual smile vanished. His homely countenance twisted and puckered with pained surprise that immediately gave way to righteous indignation. His gaunt frame shook with suppressed emotion; but he did not rise.

"That's four times," he stated coldly. "Now I'm tellin' you, Grandma, you do it just once more an' I'll lam you! I'll bust in every durned one of your slats! Go on over there an' stand alongside of Senator Volstead, like you oughta!"

Slowly Grandma closed her eyes, inhaled deeply of the blended perfume of steaming coffee, sizzling bacon, pungent mesquite smoke and flapjack. Craftily she raised an eyelid, the merest slit.

"Hump yourself, you danged old shoplifter!" Maricopa snapped, poising the batter laden frying pan. "Beat it, 'fore I plaster you!"

Unruffled, but calmly discreet, Grandma backed away from the fire and sauntered over to where Senator Volstead was contentedly chewing the leather bound corner of an empty kyack. Maricopa held the frying pan over the blaze.

"She knows better, Grandma does," he heatedly informed the bubbling batter. "Jes' takes advantage, like all them females. I'll bet she's a hundred years old but she's still nursin' the notion that she's entitled to things. Senator Volstead now, he never presumes. He's sure one modest and reliable burro, Senator Volstead is. Does his work an' attends to his own personal affairs like a—— Hey, stop eatin' that kyack! Dern my skin!"

The frying pan clattered into the fire. Snatching a crooked mesquite branch from the little pile of surplus fuel, Maricopa bounded across the sand and laid a couple of lusty whacks athwart the case-hardened rump of the drooping Senator.

"Out! Away from camp, you ornery, knot-headed bum! Eatin' up your own packbags! Chase yourself, dern yuh! Get clean out of town!"

Obediently the phlegmatic Senator

turned away from his delectable breakfast of sweat-soaked, salty leather and shuffled slowly "out of town." That kyack and its duplicate were part of his personal equipment. There would be other times. Maybe now, tonight——

On either side of the broad valley the barren hills shimmered and danced in the quivering air, answering to the touch of the rising sun. Abruptly it was full day.

Maricopa reached out with a heavily shod foot and moodily raked the empty kyack toward its mates. The Senator's teeth had hardly scratched the tough leather. But it was dern aggravating, just the same. A man dassen't take his eyes off of them fool burros for a minute! Things was gettin' so that——

Came the stifling odor of burning flour. In two bounds Maricopa reached the fire; a swift, skimming kick sent the blazing frying pan a dozen feet across the sand where it lit, bottom side up. This was the end of the limit! Bursting with wrath, Maricopa turned to find Grandma, who had silently returned to her station beside the fire, dreamily inhaling the thin smoke. The little pile of flapjacks on the flat stone was gone.

"Fair enough," Maricopa hissed softly, suddenly calm. "And I aim to be jes' as serene about it as what you are, too," he coldly promised the dreaming burro. "No jackass that ever lived is goin' to teach me anything about self control an' good breedin' an' things like that. Stand right where you are, lady! Stand right there an' watch me build a whale of a pancake out of what batter's left, an' then eat it, every dern bite! Seems to me I have more trouble than a cross-eyed Swede!" he complained, settling once more on his heels, pan in hand. He gave the pan a dexterous jerk and expertly flopped the half-cooked flapjack. "Still an' all, an' figgerin' in everythin', maybe I ain't got no more than half that much. Maybe I kinda feel a mite bad 'count of bein' alone for so long. I got a notion to try it once more. Yessir, the next pasear I take into the hills, I think I'll have me a pardner."

"You got one now!" a voice directly behind him announced. "Shove 'em up—and don't turn around!"

A tiny metal ring bored into the nape of Maricopa's neck. He laid the frying pan carefully on the sand and slowly raised his arms. The Colt at his hip was jerked from its holster; a deft hand explored his shirt, his waistband and, with especial thoroughness, the area under his left armpit.

"Guess that's all," the voice surmised. "You're like me—one gun's enough. Turn around!"

Without attempting to lower his arms, Maricopa rose and pivoted in his tracks.

The man before him was under stature; skinny, sallow, rat-eyed. His thin lips were parted in a furtive leer that seemed to be stamped permanently on his crafty mug. He held a flat, blue automatic meaningly in his left hand. All of these details Maricopa noted swiftly and accurately; but it was the man's dress that focussed his attention in a gape of astonishment.

The fellow's slight torso was completely lost in a grotesquely oversize, heavily padded jacket of shimmering, blue-black silk. Blazoned from collar to skirt with many exact quilted squares, frogged with heavy silk cord, long and wide of sleeve, the thing was a symbol of luxury—and incongruity. A cheap cap, overalls, and tan, light-weight shoes completed the picture.

Maricopa's grizzled brows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"You a Chinaman or jes' cold?" he queried.

"Can it!" the other snarled. "Let 'em down and fix me some breakfast! That canteen of water. And the doughgod and the bacon—and java! Bring 'em here to me. And don't make one single, funny move!"

He squatted on the sand and shifted the automatic. Maricopa stared at him for a long minute in silent appraisal; he nodded as he turned away to fetch the canteen. The man in the padded jacket seized the blanket covered vessel and drank in great, choking gulps, heedless of the nearness of his prisoner.

"How far's the nearest town?" he demanded when he had finished.

"It's about forty miles to Hermosillo," Maricopa told him truthfully.

"Then that's where we're going," he announced. "Listen to me: I'm straight from Guaymas, overland across this damn desert, in this rig! I jumped a rotten Mex steamer outa Frisco. I quit 'em! I couldn't stand that dirty outfit no more!"

The rat eyes narrowed craftily as he

tried to read the effect of his thin story in the other's expressionless face.

"Say, fella, don't laugh at this coat no more!" he flared, his sharp features twisting with sudden rage. "I don't like it! You're going to take me to this Hermosillo," he went on with cold finality. "If it's no further than you say, we ought to do it in two days. I got to get to some town, any town, quick! This damn desert is driving me bugs!"

"Seems like you're the doctor," Maricopa conceded, shuffling back to the fire. "We can start soon as you eat."

Calmly and without haste he slid the huge flapjack into the single tin plate his meagre outfit afforded. He arranged all of the bacon on top of it and carried the bountiful ration, with his lone set of "tools," to the squatting figure. The little man snatched the offering with his free hand.

"The java!" he snarled.

Not a flicker of resentment showed in Maricopa's steady eyes as he turned silently back to the fire, secured a cup and the pot of coffee and came once more before his captor. He even smiled tolerantly as he made a little play of balancing the empty cup on the rim of the other's extended plate. Dern if it wasn't funny! Him, Maricopa Steve, forced to flunkey in his own camp for a skinny, two-by-four sewer-rat!

He poised the coffee pot as though to pour, coughed, and with catlike quickness dashed the scalding brew in the man's face. Almost with the same motion a hamlike fist thudded against the fellow's chin. Maricopa's self-invited guest toppled over. He was out before his head hit the sand.

Instantly Maricopa retrieved his Colt from the other's waistband and dropped it in his holster. Then his gaze fastened on the overturned plate and the sand covered flapjack.

"Dern it! Look at that now!" he swore mildly. "Plumb ruined, an' every drop of coffee gone! What did I say about trouble a few minutes ago?"

He bent over while his big hands leisurely but thoroughly searched the still figure; after which, he gathered in the blue automatic from where it lay, ten feet away. He examined the flat gun curiously, then shoved it inside his shirt.

When the man in the padded jacket sat up dizzily, a few minutes later, Maricopa was flopping the last of a new stack of flapjacks. And the refilled coffee pot was beginning to spout a fragrant vapor. The odor was compelling; but the fellow made no attempt to rise. He watched silently while Maricopa divided the bacon and the thin cakes impartially. The share on the plate, with a full cup of coffee, the big man carried beyond the fire a little distance and deposited on the sand.

"There's yours," he pointed, after returning to his place beside the saddle blanket.

The little man rose unsteadily, felt of his swollen jaw and shuffled over to where the food awaited him. Without remark, he sat down there and fell to eating; but his rat eyes never left Maricopa's placid face. They finished in silence; it was after the dregs of the coffee pot had been drained into the little man's cup before Maricopa spoke.

"We'll pack an' pull out for Hermosillo right away," he said. "I was goin' there, anyway, though I didn't figger to start till the cool of the evening. But there's two of us now, and this is pretty near the finish of the grub. Where'd you drop from this morning, anyway?"

"I flopped about ten o'clock last night right over there behind that little ridge," the other answered. "You musta been asleep. That's why I didn't tumble I was close to a camp until you started movin' around this morning. My canteen and some bread and stuff is out there."

His shifty eyes swept the hot, drab monotony. The thin body stiffened. A swift wave of fear washed the crafty grin from his hard face.

"Say, you take me to that town!" he blurted in panicky appeal. "I'll square it! I got all kinds of friends in Frisco that'll come across for me! Say, I'm 'Ham Grease' Jimmy! Everybody in Frisco knows me!"

" 'Bout the first thing I ought to do is learn you how to come into another man's camp," Maricopa answered. "But I'm takin' you into Hermosillo—an' you won't owe me nothin' when you get there. Only —write this on your cuff: you make jes' one more bad break an' all them Frisco friends of your'n is goin' to be too few to help any. Get your canteen an' then haze them burros into camp."

IT WAS mid-morning and blazing hot when they started. As an assistant packer, Ham Grease had been a joke; but once on the move, he began to redeem himself. He curtly refused Maricopa's offer to include the quilted jacket in the Senator's load, and quickly struck out in the lead, apparently anxious to avoid further reference to the queer garment. All through the long day he plodded steadily on, the heavy jacket draped over a thin arm, silently fighting the scorching heat with innumerable little pulls at the canteen he carried, looking back from time to time only that he might correct his course according to Maricopa's pantomime directions.

The night breezes from the distant Gulf were sweeping up the valley when the latter called a halt under the lee of a broken butte beside a half filled water hole.

By tacit agreement they kept apart while making camp; the jacks were watered and supper cooked and eaten in silence, each man carefully avoiding the other. Supper finished, they sprawled on opposite sides of the little fire, smoking moodily. For the space of an hour not a dozen words passed between them.

Ham Grease, weary to the point of collapse, was dozing fitfully when Maricopa knocked the ashes from his cold pipe, rose stiffly and secured a pack lashrope. He made a noose, turned toward the fire and called sharply. Ham Grease sat up with a jerk, the loop descended and was drawn tight, pinioning his arms. He struggled furiously, clawing and snarling like a maddened cat; but presently he lay quiet, tightly bound from shoulders to ankles.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded, licking his dry lips.

"Bedtime. You stay like this till morning," Maricopa told him, testing the final knot.

"You're crazy as hell!" Ham Grease hissed. "You can't keep me like this, man! Say, I'm all in! I can't sleep this way! Say, I done what you told me, all day long, didn't I?" he plead, choking back an impotent sob. "Aw say, guy, take 'em off! I won't be able to stand on me feet tomorrow!"

Plainly, Maricopa was troubled. He shook his head in evident distress as he said, "I'm sorry. But after this morning, it's the only way I got of being sure. You'll sleep some. But don't try to keep me awake," he warned, " 'less you want me to gag you."

Then, over the rigid figure, he carefully spread his heaviest blanket. Later, the night would be cold.

He lay awake on his own thin blanket for hours, puzzled. This city rat, way down here in the Sonora desert in mid-July, looking for a town! Sure must have treated him bad on that steamboat. At that, he didn't shape up as much of a hombre. A liar by the watch, prob'ly. That Chink coat, now!

Beyond the dead fire, Ham Grease strained persistently at his bonds, choking back the sobs that were torn from his weary, aching body, terrified lest he rouse the still figure that had twice bested him so easily. Finally, exhausted, he lay quiet; but his warped brain seethed with hate.

He'd wait! He'd wait a million years; but he'd get even and then some! No desert boob could hand him, Ham Grease Jimmy, any such raw deal as this! He stared for ages at the jeweled sky, unseeing, planning, nursing his bitter anger until at last, numbed by his bonds, he slept.

THEY were on the move a good hour before sun-up. They traveled slowly at first while Ham Grease forced the stiffness from his aching body. But not once did he complain. Far out in the lead he plodded doggedly on, cold, venomous anger deadening his pain.

At noon they came on a road and thereafter, at intervals, passed a mud walled hacienda. Just at dusk they topped a low ridge and the lights of Hermosillo blinked beneath them.

"There's your burg," Maricopa spoke. "I'll give you your gun when we get there, or you can hustle on in alone an' I'll give it to you tomorrow."

"I'm going to stay with you!" Ham Grease snarled. "I gotta! I can't talk to them greasers. But don't you worry," he sneered, "I ain't going to start nothin' —yet."

Maricopa clucked to the burros. "That's real generous an' fair," he admitted placidly.

They took supper in a lowly 'dobe tavern at the edge of town; and they spread their blankets in the adjoining corral where they had penned the burros. As on the previous night, Ham Grease was weary beyond the telling, but he could not sleep. His shallow brain was in a ferment from his attempts to arrange the events of the past two days.

"You're crazy!" he spat, sitting up abruptly. "Bringin' me outa that damn desert and turning me loose this way after

what I tried to do to yuh! Say, why didn't you lift me wad! You found the roll in me shirt—found it when you took me gat! You're bugs!"

Ham Grease snorted contemptuously. The wooden-faced, donkey-herding boob! He fell back on the hard bed, grinning derisively at a winking star. An instant later he was sound asleep.

Hours later Grandma came to Maricopa's side, nosing him awake. He cuffed her soft muzzle impatiently, sat up and filled his pipe. Dern Grandma and this here Ham Grease Jimmy and the whole crazy mix-up! The idea, puttin' that Chink coat under his head so careful, like he was afraid somebody might steal the dern thing! Sure queer about that coat. Betcha if somebody was to try to snitch it, Ham Grease would wake up, first thing.

He rose quietly and tiptoed over to the sleeping figure. With infinite caution he raised a corner of the folded jacket and slipped the blue automatic under Ham Grease Jimmy's head.

FROM the 'dobe tavern they came directly to the corral after their breakfast of tortillas, beans and black vicious coffee. Maricopa immediately set to work on a pack saddle whose breeching needed attention.

Ham Grease built a thin, flat cigarette and stood by, watching.

"Say, is they a redlight district in this burg?" he demanded abruptly.

"W-e-l-l, you'd naturally know more about that than me, seein' that this is the first time either of us has ever been here," Maricopa drawled.

"Nice, ain't yuh?" Ham Grease sneered. "All right. You stay here and talk to the donkeys. Me, I'm going uptown to get next to certain things I gotta know about this town. At that, I'm much obliged for me gat."

Abruptly, he turned away, flushing. He had not intended to mention the return of the automatic.

"Better leave off that coat," Maricopa advised. "Looks kinda funny in this heat, 'specially on a white man."

Swift as the dart of a snake's tongue Ham Grease Jimmy's hand found his open shirt. His fingers closed over the flat gun, his beady eyes glittering with sudden suspicion.

"Like hell I'll leave the coat!" he hissed. "This coat goes wit' me! It's the only coat I——"

Maricopa was not even looking at him. His steady eyes never left the saddle he was mending. But something in his very serenity made Ham Grease brake his tongue in sudden shame. Slowly the little man's hand came away from the flat gun.

"Thought you couldn't talk no Spanish," Maricopa reminded him.

"I can't," Ham Grease acknowledged truthfully. "But there's somethin' I gotta find out—and them's the only kind of people that'll be able to tell me. See you by an' by."

As Ham Grease went out the gate, Maricopa laid aside the saddle.

"Guess I'll mosey uptown, too, an' buy some grub and stuff," he confided to the nearby Senator. "Be ready, kinda, you an' Grandma. More'n likely we're going to leave this town before we finish our visit."

Differing widely from the average man of the hills, at least in this, shopping was to Maricopa a rare treat. He strolled leisurely through the little city's considerable business section, keenly alive to the indolent life about him, his homely face alight with friendly interest. He visited many of the forbidding looking stores, haggling over each small purchase with the thorough enjoyment of the habitual bargain hunter. It was well into the siesta hour, as more than one impatient merchant had politely reminded him, when he started for the corral, glowing with quiet satisfaction and staggering under the weight of two well-filled gunny bags.

Three figures were grouped about his pile of dunnage as he came into the corral. Ham Grease was one of them. The two others were Chinese, and, strangely enough, Maricopa was not in the least surprised. As he approached, the buzz of low talk ended abruptly with the white man's sharp, "Not a chance!"

The curt veto ended the matter, whatever it was; for the Orientals left immediately, their bland faces revealing no faintest trace of disappointment as they shuffled off.

"Come back when you're awake!" Ham Grease called after them derisively as they turned out of the gate.

"Wanted to buy me coat," he explained candidly. "That littlest one piped me off uptown; an' nothin' would do but I had to go along to his restaurant. They was more than a dozen Chinks there. The mornin' passes very pleasant. They feed me twicet and they fill me to the neck wit' gin and rice wine; but they don't offer me enough for me pretty silk coat. Say, that little Chink is crazy to get it!"

"Well, it's your coat an' I ain't askin' you why you don't sell it. But you ought to have a regular coat when you get on the train," Maricopa opined. "This here is a mainline town, you know, with a train through to the Border every day. And that's why you was so anxious to get to a town, so's you could get back to Frisco an' all them friends of your'n, wasn't it?"

"Y-e-a-h," Ham Grease admitted slowly, his eyes softening with remembrance. "You said it! There ain't nobody wants to get back to Frisco no worser than what I do! But when I hop a rattler outa here, it's a pipe I'll have to take her underneat'. So I ain't worryin' about me spats or me Prince Albert."

"W-e-ll now, if you ain't got money enough for your fare——" Maricopa hesitated.

"Forget it!" Ham Grease ordered sharply. "Ain't I got the roll you was to nice to glom when you went through me shirt?"

He turned away angrily to hide the hot flush he felt mounting to his temples.

"Cripes!" he swore. "I'm beatin' it for America! That was the first time in me life I ever passed up money!"

He slipped out of the loose jacket, folded it carefully and stuffed it into an empty kyack, covering it and filling the bag with coils of lashrope. So, the coat well hidden, he tossed the kyack to the top of the dunnage pile and sauntered out of the corral, whistling carelessly. That coat, he felt confidently, would be in that packbag when he returned, exactly as he had left it. The quiet man fussing with his gunny bags would see to it.

For an hour Maricopa busied himself dividing, according to weight, the morning's purchases. Senator Volstead's load should equal Grandma's, exactly. Of course, Grandma was lots the biggest; but age, thataway, was entitled to consideration. And in the meantime, both should have all the grain they could eat, because——

He turned quickly as a shadow fell across his shoulder. Behind him, the two Chinos stood within arms length, smiling.

"You' podnah he go 'way?" the little one questioned blandly.

"Downtown," Maricopa confirmed, rising. "An' he took the coat with him."

"You smaht man," the Oriental grinned appreciatively. "Take him coat, eh? Yah! Maybe no take. You lishun me, Kee Mah: I gi' you seventy-fi' dolla you gi' me him coat."

"'Tain't mine," Maricopa refused.

"Lishun," the Chinaman urged. "I gi' you one hunned—one hunned fi'ty, you gi' me!"

"'Tain't mine," Maricopa repeated stolidly.

"You foolis'!" the tall one cut in. "Mo' bettah you sell him. Him belong one big Chinaman. Big boss my tong—you sabe? No belong you' podnah. Bettah you sell him. No? Too bad. All lite. No mo' talk. Too bad!"

Together they turned away, wasting no more time in argument. But they smiled friendly enough at the lean white man as they padded by, silently, as they had come.

"A hundred an' fifty dollars!" Maricopa marveled. "'Tain't worth it. There's something smelly about that there coat. I'll betcha that skinny rat needs watchin'!"

Later, he was to have other visitors. Within the hour a mozo, followed by a woman, entered the corral and came straight to where he sat, still fussing over his outfit.

The lady was the bearer of a dazzling smile and an invitation. The Señor Americano, she announced, was to return with her to her home, immediately. The Señor Ham Grease was there even now, awaiting him. Much good time at her casa; much tequila, much music; the fandango. *Si.* The mozo would stay and guard the camp until the señor's return.

The Señor Americano listened gravely, hat in hand, his slow smile carrying no hint of what was passing through his mind.

He was sorry, he told her in fluent 'dobe Spanish, but he could not leave. Señor Ham Grease had evidently forgotten the silken coat he had left in his compañero's care. And not an hour since, two Chinos had come with an offer of much money for the beautiful garment.

The girl's eyes narrowed to slits of blazing jet. So! Instantly he had read her true errand, this gaunt gringo was laughing at her! She held herself with effort, her hard face setting grimly.

The señor spoke her language, then? *Bueno!* Also, the Chinos had warned her

that the Americano was no fool. Very well. That coat, señor—the Chinos would have it! It was the garment of ceremony of one great dignitary of the Chino people. It must not stay in the irreverent hands of the Señor Ham Grease, who had come by it dishonestly. The Chinos knew. And make no mistake, señor, they would have that coat! They were rich and powerful, here in Hermosillo. The tall one had sent her in one last effort to get the coat peaceably and he had told her to choose her own way; but——

She would pay five hundred dollars, American gold, for that coat, here, now!

"'Tain't mine," Maricopa refused, lapsing into his own tongue.

"Fool!" she spat. "Keep it! Keep it! They told me I should fail!" she screamed. "Listen, you: tell the rat who comes from the sewers that I, Luisa, know him! And I saw in his lying face that he knew me, the toad! I know! I know he remembers of me and of the time when I, too, was of your San Francisco! And I know why the police of every California city search for him! Bah! Keep the coat safe for your bandy-legged compañero! Not one peso shall you get now, either of you, wooden man with the fat head of the pig!"

"She's mad," the wooden man murmured, watching her surge through the gate ahead of the stolid mozo. "Maybe I ought to have fussed with her some. Might have made her feel better. Women is like that," he reasoned sagely. "Wonder what makes her so white under that yella skin? She's plump enough, but she's dyin' standin' up, looks like."

He crossed to where the jacks were drowsing in the shadow of the corral wall.

"Tomorrow we pull out," he told them. "We're herdin' with the wrong kind of folks. We ain't no angels; but we're through with gents that the police is after an' with girls with yella white faces an' eyes that look like they was starin' straight out of hell. We're prospectors, we are, an' we're goin' back to where we belong. Five hundred dollars for a coat! You heard it your own selves. Dern if I'll ever ask him; but I sure hope that crooked little Ham Grease tells me why."

It was late in the afternoon when Ham Grease returned. He stepped jauntily and Maricopa noted that his eyes were unusually bright.

"Say, I had the time of me life!" he began. "Me and the——"

"Them two Chinamen was here again," Maricopa cut him off.

"They was, hey?" The little man sobered instantly. "So that's why I didn't see 'em all afternoon, the yella sneaks! Workin' on you for a change, eh? Well?"

"A woman come, too," Maricopa went on evenly. "Said she knowed you. Offered me five hundred dollars for your coat. Better put that thing away somewheres."

"Luisa!" Ham Grease gasped. "That's why she slipped out—to beat it down here and try it on you. The lyin' snake! What did she say about me and that coat, hey? Hold on—never mind. Them Chinks is going to pay me what's right or tomorrow I beat it. Naw, I won't either. I'll never make it. I'll stay right here."

"Well, I'm pulling out tomorrow," Maricopa told him.

"Yeh?" He started in quick surprise.

Pulling out tomorrow! This was news. Awkwardly, he picked up an empty packbag and felt of it, curiously. He recognized it for one of the pair that Grandma carried. Grandma and Senator Volstead.

He looked up, his gaze wandering off across the unkempt town. At his back he visioned the flat, hot valley bounded by the drab, barren hills. Suddenly, the corral seemed deserted, empty. Sand, and four mud walls shutting in a waste place in an alien, desolate land.

Nervously he felt for the "makin's."

"S-a-y, we had a lunch, an' I brung home a pocketful of little crackers," he announced irrelevantly. "Little birds and animals and things."

He shuffled over to where the jacks were nosing the sand for stray kernels of corn.

"Say, lookit!" he shouted excitedly a moment later. "Grandma nuzzles 'em right outa me mittt! Say, can yuh beat that?"

"Naw, you can't," Maricopa grinned slowly. "Let's go to supper."

HAM GREASE had planned an evening uptown, but some unaccountable impulse moved him to accompany Maricopa back to the corral after their flat meal at the tavern. He shuffled across the dusty road in the big man's wake, busy with strange thoughts. Gin and rice wine and the hilarity of Luisa's casa had suddenly gone flat and stale. Perhaps it was the sweet, cool air which came with the sunset that won against the fetid breath of the redlight casa. Or perhaps he preferred to have Grandma and the little Senator to nuzzle crackers from his open palm. Or maybe it was Mari-

copa who drew him. Maricopa, who, by every accepted rule and standard should be his avowed enemy; and who, the boob, had freely shared with him and aided him at every turn.

Cripes! Refusin' five hundred for the coat, when all he had to do was take the jack and laugh at him, Ham Grease. Cripes! No foolin', Maricopa was nutty!

He spread his blanket, slid out of the silk jacket and carefully folded it to serve as a pillow. After that, he sat on the bed, building innumerable flat cigarettes, stealing covert glances at Maricopa, who sprawled on his own blanket, smoking lazily. Unconsciously, he stroked the smooth folds of the blue coat from time to time. His beady eyes glittered with anticipation. Frisco! He pictured the Thalia, jammed with a milling mob of bluejackets and soldiers from the Presidio and the bay forts; down the street, the Midway, the circular floor rimmed with wide eyed tourists, leering at the daring few of their number who danced with the gaily clad girls. Purcell's, the Grotto, every joint on the Barbary Coast jammed with its ever fresh bunch of boobs, each with his fat roll! Home!

Cripes! He must be batty, sitting here on the sand, a thousand miles from nowhere, lazing away the time like the fat bull behind the booking desk in the Hall of Justice.

Tomorrow he would name his price, close with the Chinks, slip old Maricopa, the frozen-faced mutt, a nice slice, and hit the rattler. And the first thing in the morning, he'd tell Maricopa. The old stiff was a good guy, no foolin', so he'd tell him. He'd spill the works.

MARICOPA had planned to be on the road before daybreak; but the sun was full risen when Grandma nosed him awake. He sat up sleepily, drew on his heavy shoes and shuffled over to rouse Ham Grease. As he drew near, something about the still figure hastened his steps. He drew back a corner of the blanket and met the rat eyes glaring up at him murderously. With a single jerk, he stripped the covering away.

Ham Grease Jimmy lay neatly gagged and bound from neck to heels! A few quick slashes of the big man's knife and Ham Grease arose drunkenly, motioning aside the proffered aid. He fingered a lump over a swollen ear, tenderly. His fingers came away wet.

"Yuh finally woke up, didn't yuh?" he snarled. "Naturally, this would be the mornin' you'd pound your ear till dinner time!" He swayed, grinned foolishly and sank back on the blanket. "They—they used a shot-hose on me," he explained. "But I seen 'em! I come out of it before they got through tyin' me. It was the two Chinks along wit' two greasers. What yuh gapin' at? The coat's gone!" He got to his feet again, cursing vilely. "The coat was all they was after," he went on. "Never touched me roll or even me gat, the simps! C'mon, let's go get a couple shots of that tequila and some java."

He suffered Maricopa to wash the blood from his wound at the tavern horse trough, and then together they sought the cool patio for tequila and breakfast.

Ham Grease ate nothing; but he gulped drink after drink of the fiery cactus spirit, with huge draughts of the vicious coffee in between. He would get that coat back, he swore, or he'd be planted right here. And he didn't want any help or any interference. He would go slow and take no chances; but he'd get back his own if it took a million years! And, despite Maricopa's protests, he got to his feet, swearing that the time to begin was now.

"Say, which way you travelin'?" he demanded from the doorway.

"Well, I don't figger to travel for awhile —yet. Maybe you're hurt worse'n what you think," Maricopa explained awkwardly. "Reckon I'll stick around a spell."

Ham Grease stared at him owlishly, then turned away.

"You're nutty!" he gulped. "Say, wait for me at the corral, will yuh? I'll be right back. I ain't goin' to pull off nothin', honest. I'm just going to take a rubber before this mess gets too cold."

The first thing Maricopa did after returning to the corral was to serve the buros with an extra ration of corn.

"I kinda wish I'd gone along with that skinny fool," he told them, apportioning the grain carefully. "He's just like to try something. An' if ever he lands in one of these Mex jails, he'll sure wish he never seen that fool coat. Anyway, you two kinda hold yourselves ready. I'll betcha we're just about due to leave this town."

But the "skinny fool" did not land in jail. Instead, he landed back at the corral

within the hour, and he brought the coat!

"It was a pipe!" he cried, exultant. "The jane had it! It was a cinch!"

Though his plan was indefinite and he really expected to learn but little, he explained, he had gone directly to Luisa's house. Something told him the Chinos would be in their own houses, farther up the street. Luisa's rambling 'dobe casa was quiet, the inmates apparently still asleep; for he had entered and gone straight to Luisa's room without challenge.

But the señorita was not asleep. She was sitting up, as he threw open the room door, repairing a rent in the lining of the silk jacket.

"It was too easy, the boobs!" he chuckled. "I had me iron in her yella mug before she could peep. And I made her go to the front door wit' me. 'Now, make a yelp!' I told her. 'I'm just as willin' to see them funny lookin' bulls come runnin' as what you are.' And I walk down the street slow and easy, leavin' her gapin', wit' the coat on me arm! Now listen! Them Chinks ain't through. They'll never quit. But they won't make no squawk. But now, they'll never cough up a sou. More'n that, my chance to hop a rattler out of town is gone. I'll never make it that way. But I got a chance and them yella devils will stand right by and let me take it. Listen: if you was to pack up and pull out, right now in broad daylight, and let me trail along wit' you, they'll never let a peep outa theirselves! They'd figger it would be soup for 'em to overhaul us tonight, wit' nobody lookin' on.

"And the one thing they want in this mess is to be let alone. Maybe they got a drag wit' the bulls and all that; but they don't want nobody to know nothin' about that jacket. Now: before they'd have a chance to come up on us, I wouldn't be wit' you no more. I'd be long gone on me own way. So I'm askin' you: will you start out right now, and which way?"

"Derned if I see why I had to get mixed up in all these crazy doin's, anyway!" Maricopa answered irritably. "But the longer I stay here now, the more mixed up I'll get. That's sure. So I'll start. An' I'm headin' North. I aim to prospect the East ridge an' come out at Naco, or maybe Nogales."

"Mister, you're there!" Ham Grease cried happily. "Nogales is the very burg I been headin' for, right from the start. Listen: soon as we get out of sight of this rotten town, I'll leave yuh and cut across for the railroad. I'll hop the first train and I'll be half way to the States by the time them Chinks overhauls you. And I'm telling you the truth mister; I'll leave a wad of jack at that Nogales for you that'll make this donkey-herdin' look sick!"

"I ain't takin' you along account of no money," Maricopa said shortly. "Say, what in thunder is all this here mystery about that dern coat?"

Ham Grease shifted uneasily, looking away.

"Honest, I been wantin' to tell you ever since we hit town," he finally answered. "But you ain't the kind that would see things right. Say, you'd throw a fit! Say, let it ride. I'll spill the whole works after we start. Honest I will," he insisted nervously.

Maricopa frowned and shook his head.

"Derned if ever I see so much monkey business about nothin'," he grumbled. "Let's pack."

Aside from the few mozos loafing in front of the tavern, no one seemed to notice their departure. They made their way through the slovenly suburbs and across the hot valley unmolested. They were half way up the first of the low mesas on the further side when Maricopa looked back for the hundredth time, and pointed. Four mounted men were emerging from the city's edge. They were headed straight out, across the valley.

Ham Grease slipped a hand into his open shirt, snarling.

"They're miles out of range," Maricopa grinned. He shaded his eyes and squinted. "They ain't hurrying. All they'll do is keep us in sight till later. Two of 'em is Chinks. Let's move."

Ham Grease slipped his automatic back. He stood, irresolute, held by a strange, warming impulse.

"Untie the Senator's pack and gimme that coat!" he finally demanded. "I'm goin' back to meet 'em and take what I can get. There ain't a chance for me to make it to the railroad, now, or to get away. C'mon, gimme the coat."

"Why didn't you take what they was willin' to give, first off, when you had a easy chance?" Maricopa asked.

"Because they didn't offer even half what it's worth!" Ham Grease snapped.

"Well, 'tain't likely they'll offer even half of that much now," Maricopa dryly

opined. "An' that ain't your real reason for wantin' to go back. So we'll just mosey along an' look for a proper place to wait for 'em. An' look here: I'm fed up on this whole dern business! I don't want to hear another word about nothin', from now on! I ain't going to let nobody run nothin' over on you if I can stop 'em, 'cause you're with me an' you're part of my camp; but I'm done talkin' an' I don't want to hear nothin'! After we get rid of them out there you can pick your own trail."

Ham Grease listened, open mouthed. But not for an instant did he misunderstand. Clear as a bugle call he heard the fine pledge of loyalty and protection that rose above the gruff words. Dimly, he saw the sluggish jacks start forward again.

"You're nutty," he whispered, falling in behind the big man.

HOUR after hour the two silent men followed the plodding burros while Maricopa scrutinized each arroyo in close appraisal, searching for the shelter he knew they would surely need. Dusk found them in the center of a low mesa, roughly circular in shape and more than a mile across.

"Here's where we camp," Maricopa announced abruptly, stopping the burros.

"What? Right out here in the open?" Ham Grease gasped.

"Right out here in the open," the big man confirmed. "She's made to order. Move, pronto, an' help me get these packs off."

"Aw, you're bugs!" Ham Grease protested. But he sprang to throw off the lashrope that Maricopa had already loosened.

"Minute e stepped out on this mesa I know it had any kind of cover skinned a mile," Maricopa explained while he worked swiftly. "We got 'em beat! We got a pick an' shovel an' we'll throw up a circle of sand an' have protection from all sides. An' they'll be out in the open, all the time. We get an early moon an' we got the keg of water."

They dropped the loads where the burros stood, gave the patient creatures a short ration of water and hazed them away toward the nearest arroyo. Then they fell to with pick and shovel. They worked feverishly and within half an hour the curving walls of the little fort joined. The circle was no more than eight feet across; but the wide, shallow trench and the eighteen-inch embankment loomed big in the approving eyes of the builders. The coat and the water keg they buried in the center of their stronghold; then they stowed their small supply of ammunition about them and were ready.

For a time they lay quiet, watching through the growing dark. But finally, the strain of inaction and the swelling purpose within him, forced Ham Grease to speak.

"S-a-y," he began nervously, "whether you like it or not, I got to tell you. It ain't goin' to hurt you to listen, an' somethin' tells me I gotta do it now."

He built a cigarette, licked the wrapper with a dry tongue and let the flat tube dangle from a corner of his mouth.

"Say, I swiped that coat in Frisco! Swiped it offen a swell Chink what had booked passage on the same boat what brought me to Guaymas. The Chink didn't sail, like I said, after he missed the coat. But I did. And I got by easy. Nobody on that rotten tramp—and they was a couple of fly Chinks on her, too—give me or my ratty straw suitcase a t'ought. I was just a bum, signed on at the last minute to peel spuds and help the cook for me passage to Guaymas. Guaymas! What the hell would I want in that hole—or any other place except Frisco?"

He spat in disgust.

"Say, I had the whole plan," he went on. "I overhear the Chink and Terry McShane, what had an interest in the coat, fixin' up the whole thing, one night in Dante's. And I beat 'em to it by swipin' the coat and blowin'. I even figgered to cash in on the coat at Nogales, same as they had planned. And take it from me what knows, there'll be a chokin' bunch of jack for the guy that goes through wit' this!"

"Why didn't you take the train out of Guaymas, 'stead of starting out overland?" Maricopa asked.

"'Cause I got leery of the two Chinks on the boat and doped it out that it was me stall to make a complete fade," he explained. "A damn greaser tells me I can hike it to Hermosillo in two days, easy. Two days! Say, if it wasn't for you, I'd be back there in the sand, right now, wit' the birds pickin' at me! But everything's jake, at that. If we can make it to that Nogales, we'll cop a bunch of kale that'll block a tunnel! And we'll split it down the middle. Say, you think we got a chance——?"

W-h-e-e-e, a steel-jacketed answer sang over his head. *W-h-e-e-e—phut!*

"Dern my skin!" Maricopa grunted, flat on his face. "They ought to have got us —layin' here gassin' an' not keepin' a look-

out. An' they've got rifles, of course. Stay down!"

W-h-e-e-e, w-h-e-e-e, the slugs whined, directly over their heads. "Shootin' high," Maricopa commented, squirming. "Lay quiet. By an' by they'll close in if we don't answer them."

Across the valley the white moon peeped above the crest of a purple hill. A crescendo of shots roared approval.

"That's right," Maricopa seconded. "Makes it better all around. Shoot away —an' come on up."

Ham Grease, flattened against the warm sand until his thin body seemed no more than a sprawling shadow, gave no heed. His twisted brain was a-boil with newborn purpose. He rolled over and faced his companion.

"Say, that coat——

Phut!

"Oh, to hell with that coat!" Maricopa roared, rubbing the sand from his smarting eyes. "That one almost blinded me— watchin' you 'stead of them!"

"It just come to me," Ham Grease persisted. "I'm going to stop this deal and flag 'em before you get hurt. I'm going to give 'em the damn thing."

Before Maricopa could prevent, he jumped to his feet and yelled, snatching off his cap and waving it madly. He was answered by two shots; and immediately he crumpled to the sand.

"Stomach shot!" he gasped. "Twice in the same place!"

Instantly Maricopa knelt at his side, heedless of the flying bullets.

"Tell 'em to lay off!" Ham Grease begged. His thin hands tore at his already sodden shirt. "Tell 'em to come and get the damn jacket!"

Maricopa bared the little man's wounds, then felt hurriedly of his back. The filed-off Mauser slugs had entered the soft wall of flesh and had gone out just above the hips, straight through. Maricopa knew that not by any miracle could Ham Grease Jimmy last to see the hot sun rise again. Instantly forgotten were the silk jacket and the mystery that hung about it. His companion, a man of his camp, had been shot down while trying to shield him, Maricopa, from danger. Maricopa sprawled again on his stomach, drew his Colt, and waited. The firing slackened, stopped. Spread out, the four stalking them were advancing, dragging along like the lizards that scurried in front of them.

Maricopa squinted along the barrel of the Colt, estimating the distance. Not for a second had he considered yielding to his companion's entreaties. Those snakes out there should not get what they sought, now, not at any price nor for any reason.

Ham Grease, re-acting to the fearful shock, lay quiet. He watched the big man with burning eyes; but he plead no more.

Coldly, Maricopa waited until the nearest crawling figure was in range. The Colt barked and was immediately answered with a yell. The big six-gun spoke again and was rewarded with another agonized howl and a shower of slugs. Once more the Colt roared and once more came the yell that told of another target scored. And then, four men rose as one and fled into the night, in wild retreat.

Maricopa let them go. His supply of ammunition was not overlarge and the night would be long.

Ham Grease, now delirious, was swearing viciously. The rifle fire began again; but Maricopa's trained ear told him but a single gun was speaking. He lay snugly behind his rampart, waiting.

Presently the firing stopped once more and a voice sang out. "No good, no mo' fight!" the little Chino called. "My pod-nah, two nothah man, you shoot his ahm! I gi' you one thousand dolla, you gi' me him coat!"

"Come up a little closer, an' I'll bore the lot of you plumb through the middle!" Maricopa yelled. Then, "Dern my tripe!" he chuckled softly. "Three shots and three skunks winged! Boy, that's holdin' down on 'em!"

Except for an occasional groan that welled across the moon drenched mesa in answer to Ham Grease's ravings there was no sound or any movement for more than an hour. Then the little man came back from Beyond to sanity again.

"Cripes!" he swore. "Gimme a drink! I'm burnin' up!"

The tepid water dribbled into his parched throat.

"I winged three of them," Maricopa boasted. "They won't bother no more. And I'll get the other one, come daylight. The coat's safe."

Ham Grease turned his head and stared mistily at the sprawling figure of his protector.

"Cripes! You're a wonder!" he swore.

A swift, warning stab of returning agony. The burning eyes softened, the whirling brain quieted, became crystal clear.

"Say, listen: in a few minutes I'll be takin' my first flyin' lesson," he whispered, hiding his suffering behind a ghastly grin. "You take that coat to Nang Bow at Nogales. The thing is padded with seventy ounces of morphine! You ought to get better than thirty dollars an ounce——"

He stiffened in sudden spasm, coughed, choked, and lay still.

LATER, Maricopa lay brazenly smoking, thinking. Two thousand dollars, quilted into that fool coat! Ready money. More money than he had ever owned at one time in all of his hard life. Good living, music, the lights of the border towns! Tomorrow——

He sat up suddenly. Before him swam the face of Luisa, the dead-alive face of the señorita of Hermosillo. Dazed, he watched the vision fade into the night; then, like a man in a dream, he picked up the soiled cap and gently covered the sharp, cold face that lay upturned to the stars.

Now he understood why the Chinos valued the quilted jacket so highly, held the answer to the ghastly palor in Luisa's olive face; knew, and shrank from the memory of her burning eyes "that stared straight out of hell!"

THE long night passed without further sign from the besiegers.

And the dawn proved that they were through. Cautiously, Maricopa crept forward to the table-land's edge. Far down the valley, four men rode the back-trail to Hermosillo.

"Chinks and greasers!" Maricopa muttered contemptuously. "Quitters! They won't even holler to the police. Just quit—cold."

He rose stiffly, stretched his long legs, and went back to camp.

A few feet from the little fort he chose a place and went to work, while Grandma and the Senator, who had come up for their morning ration of water, stood by watching.

Finished with his digging, he carried the slight form from the little fort to the shallow pit, placing it decently. And he scattered the surplus sand before laying aside the shovel so that there would be no tell-tale mound.

After that, he dug up the silk coat and the keg of water, gave the burros their morning drink and then packed them. But the padded coat was no part of either's load. It lay on the sand, shimmering in the morning sun, while Maricopa gathered sagebrush and greasewood and what dead cacti he could find, until he had enough. He built a fire, piling on the weeds until the flames leaped higher than his head. Then he brought the quilted jacket, spread it open, and cast it into the blaze.

Quickly he piled on the remaining fuel and stepped back, away from the acrid, deadly smoke that rose in thick, choking clouds.

He stood by until the fire died down and was no more than a few glowing embers and a little heap of soft, white ashes. Satisfied, he turned and faced the spot where Ham Grease Jimmy slept.

"Unless everything is a lie, you're somewheres where you know that what I just done was right an' proper," he said. "More'n likely you're lookin' back at the misery an' the sufferin' an' the hell that stuff is causin' all over the world, right now. I'm sure grateful for what you tried to do for me; but I know you ain't kickin' at the way the play come out, same as I ain't."

He stepped back, clucked softly to Grandma and the Senator, starting them forward, North.

FIND RELICS OF EARLIEST AMERICANS

RELICS of an ancient American race that lived before the prehistoric cliff-dwellers have been found in the Mesa Verde national park on Colorado. A shrine with idols, prayer sticks, a dozen clay pipes of peculiar pattern, and platters of corn and tobacco, was found in a large ceremonial chamber unearthed by explorers of the Bureau of Ethnology. Pottery decorated in a manner radically different from anything else found in America was also discovered.

The Story Tellers' Circle

STILL GOING STRONG!

WE HAVE been harassed continually by rustlers for a long time. A few weeks ago the sheriff arrested one precious pair of such thieves and lodged them in jail, figuring they'd be safe there—two ways of speaking.

"They had earnest friends, though. A notorious Oklahoma killer with a companion—the latter a mere boy—came in with six-guns a-smokin', and stuck up the Vegas jail! They released the rustlers, stole an automobile, and then staged a running gun fight in the streets until the machine, with its four occupants, won clear of the town.

"They were followed hot and fast by cars loaded with men, and by posses on horseback, but to no avail. There is a good deal of 'hole-up' country left in the Canyon Largo district—I'll say there is! Those four outlaws disappeared, made a clean getaway. Looks as though there were a few cracks left of what used to be the great open spaces, eh?

"A week after this occurrence a whole band of Mexican rustlers came to town—and stayed. They're still guests of the sheriff, and likely won't be rescued as easily as were their predecessors."

DICK HALLIDAY,
Rancho El Dorado, Mineral Hill, P. O.,
San Miguel County, New Mexico.

THE foregoing letter was written, not in the late eighties of last century, but April ninth, 1924! Very likely—in spite of telephones, flivvers, air patrols and all other modern developments which add to the hazards of a professional gunman or outlaw—he will remain a picturesque and dramatic figure in the West for many years to come. In some measure he runs less immediate and actual risk while pursuing his nefarious ends than he did in an older day—when every two-fisted citizen carried Colonel Colt's famous equalizers to fit at least one of those fists. Such a compensation may or may not explain the outlaw's astonishing vitality; yet at any rate he remains. The West has *not* passed.

ROLLING STONES

ARE you planning a motor tour to the Aroostook woods? A camping-exploration jaunt among the totem Indian tribes of north central British Columbia? A prospecting trip in Peru? A *bateiro* ride on the ten-ton rubber carriers of the Amazon tributaries? A desert journey to some hidden, sacred fastness of the Gobi? Or what have you—in mind?

No matter, Rolling Stones, whether or not you have definite questions to ask, serious needs to fill. With our large and steadily growing corps of Information Service men, we'll do all that is humanly possible to meet and satisfy any of our readers' requests, *whether reasonable or unreasonable.* Our only taboo, one which in fairness to you and all our other adventurer friends we cannot break, is in the matter of actual employment. We don't provide jobs for men or men for jobs; it can't be done at long range. Try us with 'most anything else, brother and sister Rolling Stones! If you've just reached a spot which others ought to know—love or fear, seek or avoid—write us about it! We'll reciprocate with all the pertinent information and help at our command. Possibly we may be able to help keep the "moss" intact for a further, longer roll. And we'll pass along the good word to other comrades.

"SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT——"

THERE'S a thrill of pleasure genuine and absorbing in the first handclasp of a *new* friend! Here's Moran Tudury of New Orleans and points north, a writer whose work we hope sincerely to be able to present to you henceforth in generous measure. On the appearance in this issue of his premier SHORT STORIES' yarn, Mr. Tudury tells a little concerning his own interesting life and the genesis of this particular tale of Voudou.

As a Creole—and be it understood a Creole is a *white* man—I had rather unique right to tell the story of the THREE BLACK CANDLES. In Louisiana the Creole heart and Voudouism are never very far removed, one from the other. Marie LeVeau, mentioned in the prologue, was a white woman and a Voudou queen many years ago. The negro has not been the only race, therefore, to fall under the sinister ritual of this quixotic parody of the Catholic religion.

The story came to me several years ago when I was a reporter on the *Item* in New Orleans—the paper, by the way, upon which Lafcadio Hearn did his earlier work. I had been sent upstate on a rather unpleasant assignment, a negro axman business, and part of my journey lay through the Barataria swamps. Unconsciously, and a result of the whole affair, I suppose, the feeling grew upon me that there was a story somewhere in those desolate swamps. But it was not until months later that I stumbled across the germ of the story in an old book shop on Royal Street. The idea, incidentally, came not from a moth-eaten history, as you might imagine, but from the lips of the Creole proprietor himself.

Still, it was not until just a very few weeks ago that the atmosphere of the swamps and the three black candles, seemed all at once to come together in my mind as a story.

It is customary, I understand, to tell something here of one's self. To plunge at once into the business: I am under thirty, married to a better judge of fiction than myself, and have been everything except a bootlegger and a Teapot Dome suspect. Through a long line of jobs with newspapers, sailors, banks, and so on, I have come at last to the only one I've ever wanted—writing.

MORAN TUDURY.

"THE DESERT'S PRICE" CONTEST

BY A vote of 2 to 1 Henry Herbert Knibbs, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, and William MacLeod Raine, the three judges of the $100 prize contest, award their decision to the description submitted by Mr. Horace M. Russell, 1809 Tyler Street, Amarillo, Texas. "The Desert's Price" appeared first as a serial in SHORT STORIES, then was published as a novel. Mr. Russell's winning letter:

Fight is the desert's price, says Wilson McCann of the Flying VWs.

If you're a bush you flourish daggers. If you're a toad you wear horns. If you're a man you carry guns.

Of course there is Julia, daughter of the Circle Crosses, which outfit cherishes the thought of abolishing all Flying VWs.

And they do fight.

"Overdrawn," you say. Oh yes. *El Jornado de la Muerte*, the Painted Desert, is a titanic piece of overdrawing splashed down in a lonesome world by an impressionist Creator. "Treasure Island" is overdrawn, and "Three Musketeers." But, man, they're brave yarns!

The letter which earned the unqualified approval of one judge, was contributed by Mr. James B. Eveline, 1 Walnut Grove Place, Troy, New York.

The blinding sheen of the pi iless sun making midday a hell, and the soft evening a paradise filled with soft shadows and dim whispers; painted cities and barren wastes; far canyons and purple hills, all painted by the Master Artist.

Grief and pain, hope and despair, grim resolve and high, fierce courage; woman's love and pride's sacrifice; hope fulfilled and Justice paid; the echo of far flung shots and the tramp of cattle; toil and accomplishment; doubts and hate, and regret and bitterness—and at the end—Love and Faith triumphant. . . . They are all here—finely told by an expert word painter in The Desert's Price.

Other missives which were considered seriously until the moment of final decision were sent in by:

Miss Margaret Smith, 2727 Regent St., Berkeley, Cal.

Reverend Hugh Gordon Ross, First Church of Christ, Pittsfield, Mass.

Mr. J. Edward Leithead, 610 N. 43rd St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Dr. Frances Thornton, 607 West 180th St., New York City.

Mr. J. M. Dallam, 410 Empire Bldg., Philadelphia, Pa.

CULTUS IS COMING!

READERS of SHORT STORIES need no introduction to that lanky, homely, cantankerous cuss, Cultus Collins—who will be with us, shooting straighter than ever, in the complete novel by W. C. Tuttle which starts our next issue. Cultus fires his first shot in a Chinatown chop suey palace, aiming at a thug—But because this is guaranteed to be one of the very best novels Tuttle ever has written, we wouldn't chance spoiling your enjoyment by telling more.

"Strong Men," by George Allan Eng-

land, "Fog," by Murray Leinster, and "Whoso Diggeth a Pit," by H. Field Leslie are three short stories of exceptional quality which concern three grim, stirring phases of lawbreakers' lives. Another old favorite, J. Allan Dunn, is present with a novelette of logging, "White Water Men." In addition the number will present Part III of George Washington Ogden's gripping Western serial, and short stories by Chart Pitt, Charles Beadle, Raymond Spears, Marshall R. Hall—and finally, a whizzing auto race story by Herbert Louis McNary.

THE MAIL BAG

TO MOST of us, fiction with its setting in some particular region, has the strongest appeal. With this friend and reader, tales of the delta country are favored.

Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES for some years. Most of the stories of the magazine are very interesting to me. Meigs O. Frost's stories I like especially. I was born on the Mississippi River, therefore am partial to anything placed down on the Mississippi.

I also have missed of late the stories of R. Terry Shannon, and B. M. Bower's stories, and trust we may have something from both of them soon.

I could not get the number with "The Cajun from Bayou Lafourche," which I very much regret. Can you send me this issue? I would not willingly miss any story of Meigs O. Frost.

MRS. IOLA E. OYSTER,
9 N. Market Square,
Harrisburg, Pa.

Stories of the sea revivify pleasant memories for this ex-Navy man.

Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Friends of mine have been telling me about good magazines all my life and I've been buying them; but coming down to brass tacks I don't believe there is a better magazine printed than SHORT STORIES. I've traveled around this country of ours quite a lot, and have spent four years in the Navy so I believe I've had my share of excitement and fun. When I sit down to read such stories as "Hate," and "Hijackers," I live all the good times I've ever had, all over again. England and Penney are certainly top-hole writers; also Pierce. I hope they will write more.

There's no use in wishing success on your magazine—it can't help being successful.

EMERY E. MITCHELL,
Lewiston, Maine.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

I have not been a reader of SHORT STORIES heretofore, but a client of mine asked me if I had read Clem Yore's "A Son of the Circle" in the June 10th issue, and upon receiving my negative reply, purchased a copy of the issue and gave it to me.

From the beginning I was tremendously interested in Mr. Yore's charming story. His characters are so delightfully human! His men are virile, admirable chaps; his heroine so lovable; his descriptions of the strange, magnetic allure of the frozen North, and the great beauty of his word portraits so vivid that though I have read many, many stories of the North, I think none of them interested me so much.

I shall in the future make it a point to read SHORT STORIES as religiously as I read my daily newspaper, and I sincerely hope that I shall see many contributions from Mr. Yore's fertile brain.

BETTY MCKINLEY, Public Stenographer
Albany Hotel,
Denver, Colorado.

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

Can we wipe out 90% of all crime within 40 years?

Yes! If the public once knows the facts and acts on them

HOW is it to be done? Not by punishing criminals in the old way, but by segregating them for life, thus preventing them from breeding more criminals. All the crime in the country is committed by only 2% of the population, and nearly all of the 2% are criminals not because they are "sinful" or had a "bad bringing up," but because they inherited a defective spot on the brain. They may be intelligent enough in many cases, yet there is a kink somewhere in the mind which can never be straightened out but which, unfortunately, can be handed down to future generations.

A two-hour test of the emotions has been devised by which the sanity or criminal insanity of 40,000 persons has been definitely determined. It has become possible to foretell with amazing accuracy just what sort of crime the examined man is likely to commit. French Strother, associate editor of The ***World's Work,*** recently spent considerable time studying these remarkable developments and he is writing a series of articles showing the revolutionary new discoveries that should lead to the eradication of 90% of all crime within two generations.

Read French Strother's amazing articles in

THE WORLD'S WORK

NEXT FIVE ISSUES FOR $1.00!

DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
Garden City, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1.00 for which please send me the next 5 issues of The ***World's Work*** (regular price $1.75.)

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Address .....

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Don't jump at conclusions. Study your shoe needs carefully.

You want a shoe that looks right on your feet, a shoe that will wear like iron and hold its shape—a shoe that is reasonably priced.

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You get just those qualities in the Crawford Shoe and then some.

You can't do better than trot around to the Crawford dealer's and try on some Crawford Shoes.

Step about and see how they fit—how comfortable they are.

And your size fits you in any style or last you choose!

The **Crawford** FOR MEN *Shoe*

Most Styles $8
A few $9 and $10

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SHOE INDUSTRIES
BROCKTON, MASS.

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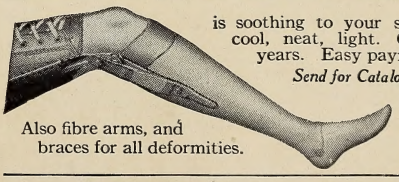

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Beware of Fat

DO you know whether you weigh too much or too little? If your weight is just right, congratulate yourself. Probably not one person in ten knows what his proper weight should be nor realizes how important it is to maintain that weight.

What is the right weight? Experts who have studied the subject of weight in its relation to health tell us that the weight tables generally in use are misleading. They give only average weights, which are the composite of the good and the bad. These averages have been assumed to be the correct weights. As a matter of fact, they are not.

Up to the age of 30, it is well to weigh five or ten pounds more than the average weight for your age and height. But from 30 on, the best weight is from 10% to 20% less than the average. At age 50, men and women are at their best when they weigh considerably *below* the average for their height.

The reason is simple: The extra weight in earlier years is needed to give the body plenty of building material and to fortify it against tuberculosis and other infections to which young people are particularly subject. When we are older and food for growth is not needed, there is no longer any advantage in carrying the heavier burden of weight.

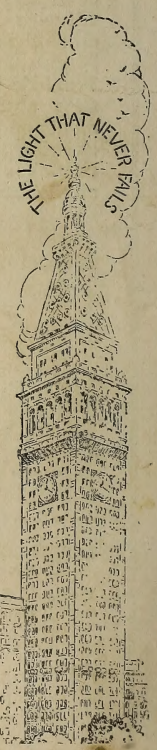
Stop and think of the six oldest people you know. The chances are they are not fat. Life insurance statistics have proved that as a rule the fat do not live to be really old men and women.

Fat is dangerous—a definite menace to life. And this is why: People who drag masses of flesh around are putting a strain upon their vital organs. High blood pressure, trouble with heart, kidneys or lungs often follow along in the train of excessive weight. The heart has to work extra hard pumping blood to tissues that the body *never was meant to have*. The digestive tract has a remorseless burden put upon it trying to dispose of needless food. An eminent specialist says that in at least 40% of the cases—fat is the predisposing cause of diabetes.

Remember, prevention is the better part of reducing. But if you *are* fat and don't want to have heart trouble or any of the diseases that fat induces—what are you to do about it?

Do not take any "fat reducers" except on the advice of your physician. They are usually viciously harmful and reduce nothing but your pocketbook. Have your doctor find out whether there is anything wrong with you physically. Sometimes glandular disturbances will cause fat.

Overweight is not always due to overeating. Exercise does not always reduce. But 90 times out of 100 the trouble is too much and too rich food and too little exercise. If you are overweight do not let laziness or complacency permit you to remain fat. Begin to reduce *right now*.



People past their youth who weigh 20% more than the average have a one-third greater death rate than the average. Those who are 40% overweight have a 50% greater death rate than the average.

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company recognizes overweight as so serious an impairment among its policyholders that it has issued a booklet which contains much valuable information for those who wish to reduce their weight.

This is the booklet that tells of the methods we have used in bringing a certain group of our own Metropolitan employees back to normal weight.

This simple regime of diet and exercise has been found to be most effective. In several cases as much as 50 pounds have been eliminated—safely and comfortably.

In this booklet will be found a weight table prepared according to the latest study on the subject, as well as a complete program of diet and exercises that will help you to reduce your weight if you are organically sound.

A copy of "Overweight—Cause and Treatment" will be mailed free to anyone who asks for it.

HALEY FISKE, *President.*

Published by

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